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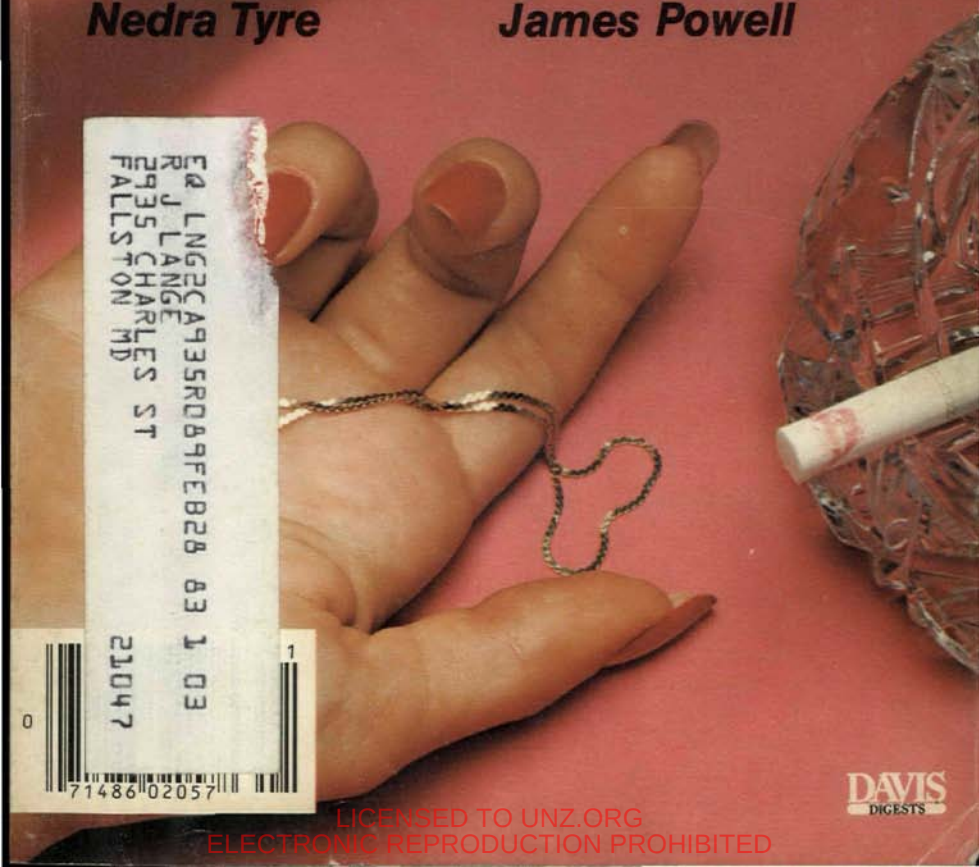

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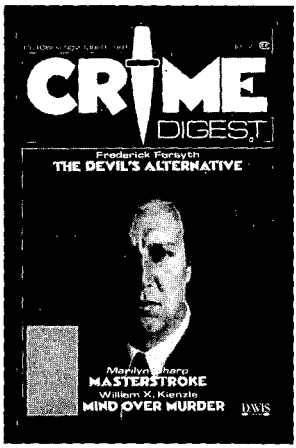

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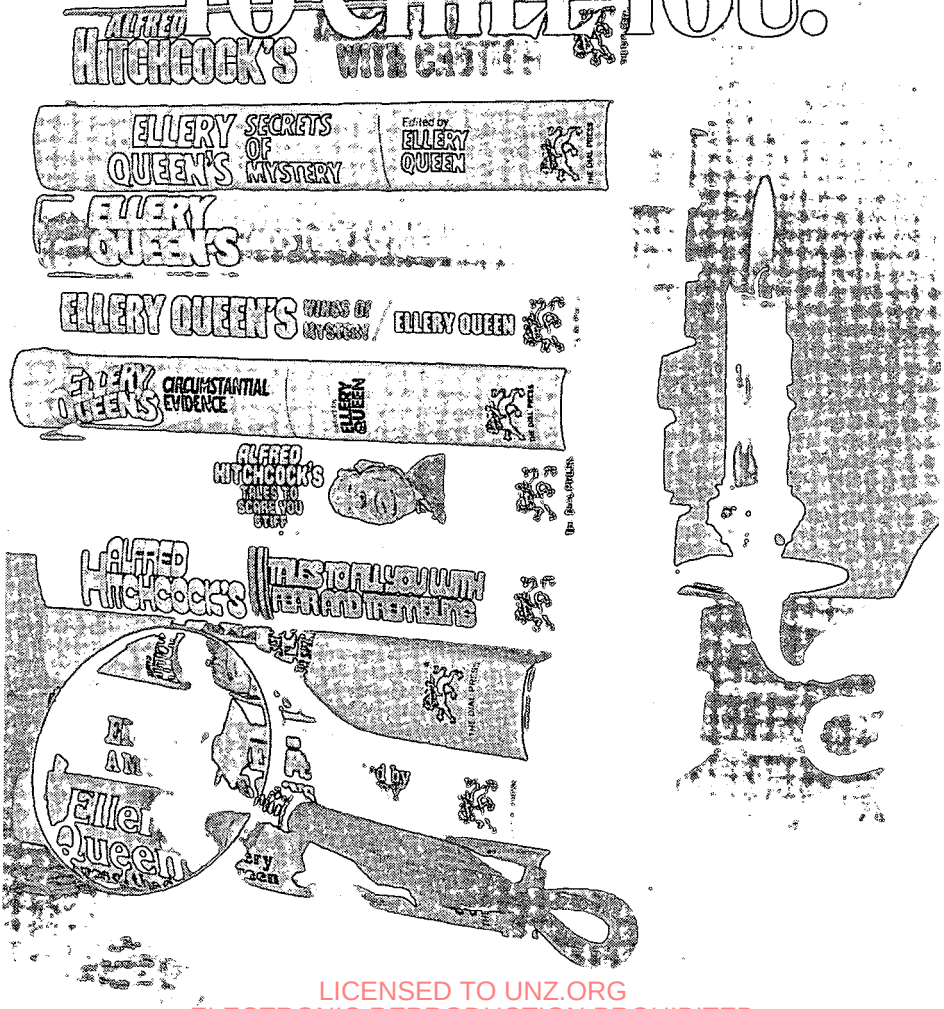

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a Christmas story by

PATRICIA MOYES

We are all familiar with that rushing floodtide, that organized chaos, that takes place every December in large department stores. It is called Christmas shopping. Here is Patricia Moyes's Xmas-marks-the-plot, in the most unlikely locale for a Christmas crime—a toy department . . .

WHO KILLED FATHER CHRISTMAS?

by **PATRICIA MOYES**

"Good morning, Mr. Borrowdale. Nippy out, isn't it? You're in early, I see." Little Miss MacArthur spoke with her usual brisk brightness, which failed to conceal both envy and dislike. She was unpacking a consignment of stout Teddy bears in the stockroom behind the toy department at Barnum and Thrums, the London store. "Smart as ever, Mr. Borrowdale," she added, jealously.

I laid down my curly-brimmed bowler hat and cane and took off my British warm overcoat. I don't mind admitting that I do take pains to dress as well as I can, and for some reason it seems to infuriate the Miss MacArthurs of the world.

She prattled on. "Nice looking, these Teddies, don't you think? Very reasonable, too. Made in Hong Kong, that'll be why. I think I'll take one for my sister's youngest."

The toy department at Barnum's has little to recommend it to anyone over the age of twelve, and normally it is tranquil and little populated. However, at Christmastime it briefly becomes the bustling heart of the great shop, and also provides useful vacation jobs for chaps like me who wish to earn some money during the weeks

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before the university term begins in January. Gone, I fear, are the days when undergraduates were the gilded youth of England. We all have to work our passages these days, and sometimes it means selling toys.

One advantage of the job is that employees—even temporaries like me—are allowed to buy goods at a considerable discount, which helps with the Christmas gift problem. As a matter of fact, I had already decided to buy a Teddy bear for one of my nephews, and I mentioned as much.

"Well, you'd better take it right away," remarked Miss MacArthur, "because I heard Mr. Harrington say he was taking two, and I think Disaster has her eye on one." Disaster was the unfortunate but inevitable nickname of Miss Aster, who had been with the store for thirty-one years but still made mistakes with her stockbook. I felt sorry for the old girl. I had overheard a conversation between Mr. Harrington, the department manager, and Mr. Andrews, the deputy store manager, and so I knew—but Disaster didn't—that she would be getting the sack as soon as the Christmas rush was over.

Meanwhile, Miss MacArthur was arranging the bears on a shelf. They sat there in grinning rows, brown and woolly, with boot-button eyes and red ribbons round their necks.

It was then that Father Christmas came in. He'd been in the cloakroom changing into his costume—white beard, red nose, and all. His name was Bert Denman. He was a cheery soul who got on well with the kids, and he'd had the Father Christmas job at Barnum's each of the three years I'd been selling there. Now he was carrying his sack, which he filled every morning from the cheap items in the stockroom. A visit to Father Christmas cost 50 pence, so naturally the gift that was fished out of the sack couldn't be worth more than 20 pence. However, to my surprise, he went straight over to the row of Teddy bears and picked one off the shelf. For some reason, he chose the only one with a blue instead of a red ribbon.

Miss MacArthur was on to him in an instant. "What d'you think you're doing, Mr. Denman? Those Teddies aren't in your line at all—much too dear. One pound ninety, they are."

Father Christmas did not answer, and suddenly I realized that it was not Bert Denman under the red robe. "Wait a minute," I said. "Who are you? You're not our Father Christmas."

He turned to face me, the Teddy bear in his hand. "That's all right," he said. "Charlie Burrows is my name. I live in the same

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lodging house with Bert Denman. He was taken poorly last night, and I'm standing in for him."

"*Well*," said Miss MacArthur. "How very odd. Does Mr. Harrington know?"

"Of course he does," said Father Christmas.

As if on cue, Mr. Harrington himself came hurrying into the stockroom. He always hurried everywhere, preceded by his small black mustache. He said, "Ah, there you are, Burrows. Fill up your sack, and I'll explain the job to you. Denman told you about the Teddy bear, did he?"

"Yes, Mr. Harrington."

"Father Christmas can't give away an expensive bear like that, Mr. Harrington," Miss MacArthur objected.

"Now, now, Miss MacArthur, it's all arranged," said Harrington fussily. "A customer came in yesterday and made a special request that Father Christmas should give his small daughter a Teddy bear this morning. I knew this consignment was due on the shelves, so I promised him one. It's been paid for. The important thing, Burrows, is to remember the child's name. It's . . . er . . . I have it written down somewhere."

"Annabel Whitworth," said Father Christmas. "Four years old, fair hair, will be brought in by her mother."

"I see that Denman briefed you well," said Mr. Harrington, with an icy smile. "Well, now, I'll collect two bears for myself—one for my son and one for my neighbor's boy—and then I'll show you the booth."

Miss Aster arrived just then. She and Miss MacArthur finished uncrating the bears and took one out to put on display next to a female doll that, among other endearing traits, actually wet its diaper. Mr. Harrington led our surrogate Father Christmas to his small canvas booth, and the rest of us busied and braced ourselves for the moment when the great glass doors opened and the floodtide was let in. The toy department of a big store on December 23 is no place for weaklings.

It is curious that even such an apparently random stream of humanity as Christmas shoppers displays a pattern of behavior. The earliest arrivals in the toy department are office workers on their way to their jobs. The actual toddlers, bent on an interview with Father Christmas, do not appear until their mothers have had time to wash up breakfast, have a bit of a go around the house, and catch the bus from Kensington or the tube from Uxbridge.

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On that particular morning it was just twenty-eight minutes past ten when I saw Disaster, who was sitting in a decorated cash desk labeled "The Elfin Grove," take 50 pence from the first parent to usher her child into Santa's booth. For about two minutes the mother waited, chatting quietly with Disaster. Then a loudly wailing infant emerged from the booth.

The mother snatched her up, and—with that sixth sense that mothers everywhere seem to develop—interpreted the incoherent screams. "She says that Father Christmas won't talk to her. She says he's asleep."

It was clearly an emergency, even if a minor one, and Disaster was already showing signs of panic. I excused myself from my customer—a middle-aged gentleman who was playing with an electric train set—and went over to see what I could do. By then, the mother was indignant.

"Fifty pence and the old man sound asleep and drunk as like as not, and at half-past ten in the morning. Disgraceful, I call it. And here's poor little Poppy what had been looking forward to—"

I rushed into Father Christmas's booth. The man who called himself Charlie Burrows was slumped forward in his chair, looking for all the world as if he were asleep; but when I shook him, his head lolled horribly, and it was obvious that he was more than sleeping. The red robe concealed the blood until it made my hand sticky. Father Christmas had been stabbed in the back, and he was certainly dead.

I acted as fast as I could. First of all, I told Disaster to put up the CLOSED sign outside Santa's booth. Then I smoothed down Poppy's mother by leading her to a counter where I told her she could select any toy up to one pound and have it free. Under pretext of keeping records, I got her name and address. Finally I cornered Mr. Harrington in his office and told him the news.

I thought he was going to faint. "Dead? Murdered? Are you sure, Mr. Borrowdale?"

"Quite sure, I'm afraid. You'd better telephone the police, Mr. Harrington."

"The police! In Barnum's! What a terrible thing! I'll telephone the deputy store manager first and *then* the police."

As a matter of fact, the police were surprisingly quick and discreet. A plainclothes detective superintendent and his sergeant, a photographer, and the police doctor arrived, not in a posse, but as individuals, unnoticed among the crowd. They assembled in the booth,

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where the deputy manager—Mr. Andrews—and Mr. Harrington and I were waiting for them.

The superintendent introduced himself—his name was Armitage—and inspected the body with an expression of cold fury on his face that I couldn't quite understand, although the reason became clear later. He said very little. After some tedious formalities Armitage indicated that the body might be removed.

"What's the least conspicuous way to do it?" he asked.

"You can take him out through the back of the booth," I said. "The canvas overlaps right behind Santa's chair. The door to the staff quarters and the stockroom is just opposite, and from there you can take the service lift to the goods entrance in the mews."

The doctor and the photographer between them carried off their grim burden on a collapsible stretcher, and Superintendent Armitage began asking questions about the arrangements in the Father Christmas booth. I did the explaining, since Mr. Harrington seemed to be verging on hysteria.

Customers paid their 50 pence to Disaster in the Elfin Grove, and then the child—usually alone—was propelled through the door of the booth and into the presence of Father Christmas, who sat in his canvas-backed director's chair on a small dais facing the entrance, with his sack of toys beside him. The child climbed onto his knee, whispered its Christmas wishes, and was rewarded with a few friendly words and a small gift from Santa's sack.

What was not obvious to the clientele was the back entrance to the booth, which enabled Father Christmas to slip in and out unobserved. He usually had his coffee break at about 11:15, unless there was a very heavy rush of business. Disaster would pick a moment when custom seemed slow, put up the CLOSED NOTICE, and inform Bert that he could take a few minutes off. When he returned, he pressed a button by his chair that rang a buzzer in the cashier's booth. Down would come the notice, and Santa was in business again.

Before Superintendent Armitage could comment on my remarks, Mr. Harrington broke into a sort of despairing wail. "It must have been one of the customers!" he cried.

"I don't think so, sir," said Armitage. "This is an inside job. He was stabbed in the back with a long thin blade of some sort. The murderer must have opened the back flap and stabbed him clean through the canvas back of his chair. That must have been someone

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who knew the exact arrangements. The murderer then used the back way to enter the booth—"

"I don't see how you can say that!" Harrington's voice was rising dangerously. "If the man was stabbed from outside, what makes you think anybody came into the booth?"

"I'll explain that in a minute, sir."

Ignoring Armitage, Harrington went on. "In any case, he wasn't our regular Father Christmas! None of us had ever seen him before. Why on earth would anybody kill a man that nobody knew?"

Armitage and the deputy manager exchanged glances. Then Armitage said, "*I* knew him, sir. Very well. Charlie Burrows was one of our finest plainclothes narcotics officers."

Mr. Harrington had gone green. "You mean—he was a policeman?"

"Exactly, sir. I'd better explain. A little time ago we got a tipoff from an informer that an important consignment of high-grade heroin was to be smuggled in from Hong Kong in a consignment of Christmas toys. Teddy bears, in fact. The drug was to be in the Barnum and Thrums carton, hidden inside a particular Teddy bear, which would be distinguished by having a blue ribbon around its neck instead of a red one."

"Surely," I said, "you couldn't get what you call an important consignment inside one Teddy bear, even a big one."

Armitage sighed. "Shows you aren't familiar with the drug scene, sir," he said. "Why, half a pound of pure high-grade heroin is worth a fortune on the streets."

With a show of bluster Harrington said, "If you knew this, Superintendent, why didn't you simply intercept the consignment and confiscate the drug? Look at the trouble that's been—"

Armitage interrupted him. "If you'd just hear me out, sir. What I've told you was the sum total of our information. We didn't know who in Barnum's was going to pick up the heroin, or how or where it was to be disposed of. We're more interested in getting the people—the pushers—than confiscating the cargo. So I had a word with Mr. Andrews here, and he kindly agreed to let Charlie take on the Father Christmas job. And Charlie set a little trap. Unfortunately, he paid for it with his life." There was an awkward silence.

He went on. "Mr. Andrews told us that the consignment had arrived and was to be unpacked today. We know that staff get first pick, as it were, at new stock, and we were naturally interested to

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see who would select the bear with the blue ribbon. It was Charlie's own idea to concoct a story about a special present for a little girl—"

"You mean, that wasn't true?" Harrington was outraged. "But I spoke to the customer myself!"

"Yes, sir. That's to say, you spoke to another of our people, who was posing as the little girl's father."

"You're very thorough," Harrington said.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Well, as I was saying, Charlie made a point of selecting the bear with the blue ribbon and taking it off in his sack. He knew that whoever was picking up the drop would have to come and get it—or try to. You see, if we'd just allowed one of the staff to select it, that person could simply have said that it was pure coincidence—blue was such a pretty color. Difficult to prove criminal knowledge. You understand?"

Nobody said anything. With quite a sense of dramatic effect Armitage reached down into Santa's sack and pulled out a Teddy bear. It had a blue ribbon round its neck.

In a voice tense with strain Mr. Andrews said, "So the murderer didn't get away with the heroin. I thought you said—"

Superintendent Armitage produced a knife from his pocket. "We'll see," he said. "With your permission, I'm going to open this bear."

"Of course."

The knife ripped through the nobbly brown fabric, and a lot of stuffing fell out. Nothing else. Armitage made a good job of it. By the time he had finished, the bear was in shreds: and nothing had emerged from its interior except kapok.

Armitage surveyed the wreckage with a sort of bleak satisfaction. Suddenly brisk, he said, "Now. Which staff members took bears from the stockroom this morning?"

"I did," I said at once.

"Anybody else?"

There was a silence. I said, "I believe you took two, didn't you, Mr. Harrington?"

"I . . . em . . . yes, now that you mention it."

"Miss MacArthur took one," I said. "It was she who unpacked the carton. She said that Dis—Miss Aster—was going to take one."

"I see." Armitage was making notes. "I presume you each signed for your purchases, and that the bears are now with your things in the staff cloakroom." Without waiting for an answer he turned to me. "How many of these people saw Burrows select the bear with the blue ribbon?"

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"All of us," I said. "Isn't that so, Mr. Harrington?"

Harrington just nodded. He looked sick.

"Well, then," said Armitage, "I shall have to inspect all the bears that you people removed from the stockroom."

There was an element of black humor in the parade of the Teddies, with their inane grins and knowing, beady eyes: but as one after the other was dismembered, nothing more sensational was revealed than a growing pile of kapok. The next step was to check the stock-book numbers—and sure enough, one bear was missing.

It was actually Armitage's Sergeant who found it. It had been ripped open and shoved behind a pile of boxes in the stockroom in a hasty attempt at concealment. There was no ribbon round its neck, and it was constructed very differently from the others. The kapok merely served as a thin layer of stuffing between the fabric skin and a spherical womb of pink plastic in the toy's center. This plastic had been cut open and was empty. It was abundantly clear what it must have contained.

"Well," said the Superintendent, "it's obvious what happened. The murderer stabbed Burrows, slipped into the booth, and substituted an innocent Teddy bear for the loaded one, at the same time changing the neck ribbon. But he—or she—didn't dare try walking out of the store with the bear, not after a murder. So, before Charlie's body was found, the murderer dismembered the bear, took out the heroin, and hid it." He sighed again. "I'm afraid this means a body search. I'll call the Yard for a police matron for the ladies."

It was all highly undignified and tedious, and poor old Disaster nearly had a seizure, despite the fact that the police matron seemed a thoroughly nice and kind woman. When it was all over, however, and our persons and clothing had been practically turned inside out, still nothing had been found. The four of us were required to wait in the staff restroom while exhaustive searches were made for both the heroin and the weapon.

Disaster was in tears, Miss MacArthur was loudly indignant and threatened to sue the police for false arrest, and Mr. Harrington developed what he called a nervous stomach, on account, he said, of the way the toy department was being left understaffed and unsupervised on one of the busiest days of the year.

At long last Superintendent Armitage came in. He said, "Nothing. Abso-bloody-lutely nothing. Well, I can't keep you people here indefinitely. I suggest you all go out and get yourselves some lunch." He sounded very tired and cross and almost human.

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With considerable relief we prepared to leave the staffroom. Only Mr. Harrington announced that he felt too ill to eat anything, and that he would remain in the department. The Misses MacArthur and Aster left together. I put on my coat and took the escalator down to the ground floor, among the burdened, chattering crowd.

I was out in the brisk air of the street when I heard Armitage's voice behind me.

"Just one moment, if you please, Mr. Borrowdale."

I turned. "Yes, Superintendent. Can I help you?"

"You're up at the university, aren't you, sir? Just taken a temporary job at Barnum's for the vacation?"

"That's right."

"Do quite a bit of fencing, don't you?"

He had my cane out of my hand before I knew what was happening. The sergeant, an extraordinarily tough and unattractive character, showed surprising dexterity and speed in getting an arm grip on me. Armitage had unscrewed the top of the cane, and was whistling in a quiet, appreciative manner. "Very nice. Very nice little sword stick. Something like a stilletto. I don't suppose Charlie felt a thing."

"Now, look here," I said. "You can't make insinuations like that. Just because I'm known as a bit of dandy, and carry a sword stick, that's no reason—"

"A dandy, eh?" said Armitage thoughtfully. He looked me up and down in a curious manner, as if he thought something was missing.

It was at that moment that Miss MacArthur suddenly appeared round the corner of the building.

"Oh, Mr. Borrowdale, look what I found! Lying down in the mews by the goods entrance! It must have fallen out of the staffroom window! Lucky I've got sharp eyes—it was behind a rubbish bin, I might easily have missed it!" And she handed me my bowler hat.

That is to say, she would have done if Armitage hadn't intercepted it. It didn't take him more than five seconds to find the packages of white powder hidden between the hard shell of the hat and the oiled-silk lining.

Armitage said, "So you were going to peddle this stuff to young men and women at the university, were you? Charming, I must say. Now you can come back to the Yard and tell us all about your employers—if you want a chance at saving your own neck, that is."

Miss MacArthur was goggling at me. "Oh, Mr. Borrowdale!" she squeaked. "Have I gone and done something wrong?"

I never did like Miss MacArthur.

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

The tale of Billy Welcome, a Free Spirit, an adept in the Fine Art of Hustling, the skipper and owner of the rundown 30-foot cabin cruiser Pot-o'-Gold, and seemingly a victim of life's vanished dreams . . .

ANYTHING GOES

by DONALD OLSON

In its twenty-eighth year Billy Welcome's life had settled into what most would have called a routine, although Billy himself would have admitted no such thing. A routine existence would have betrayed one of his most sacred vows as a Free Spirit. Yet he could not have denied that this day, which was to have such a profound effect on the rest of his life, started as had most of the others over the past two years.

He crawled out of his bunk in the tiny cabin of the Pot-o'-Gold, his thirty-foot cabin cruiser, washed, shaved (being careful not to alter the shape of his small beard and mustache), donned his shorts and jeans and the T-shirt which had been laundered so often the words *Anything Goes* were now barely decipherable across his muscular chest, and was presently strolling down the pier to the white-painted, somewhat ramshackle Rainbow Café facing the seawall and the Gulf of Mexico. He greeted Charlie, who ran the Bait Box, waved to a couple of early-morning anglers perched on the seawall waiting for the first bite of red snapper, and entered the café.

"Mornin', Perk."

"How you doin', Billy?"

The owner-manager of the Rainbow Café was named Patricia Pettit but everyone called her Perk, presumably because in her earlier,

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blonder days her quick smile and vivacity merited the nickname. Now past forty, she relied on the skillful use of makeup to recreate the kewpie-doll cuteness of her face, while the perkiness was kept in reserve for the after-dark hours, as if it could only be activated by colored lights and music with an up-tempo beat.

Billy straddled a stool and waited for the coffee and scrambled eggs that Perk had begun to prepare as soon as she spotted Billy crossing the pier.

"Make it a double, Perk." Meaning one of the jumbo-size mugs.

Perk gave him a wink of her heavily mascaraed, Morning Glory-blue eye. "Rough night, Billy?"

Billy raked a hand through his tousled, gold-brown hair. "Gettin' old, Perk. I can't keep up with these chickadees."

Perk set the plate of eggs in front of him and nodded toward the sign outside that read *Boat for Hire.*

"Someone left a message for you."

"Male or female someone?"

"Female."

"A hag?"

"But with class, Billy. I told her you'd be around this morning. She said she'd drop over. She's at the Channel Marker."

"Tall skinny blonde?"

"I think the word is svelte. You know her?"

"Lemar said one of his new guests had been askin' about my boat. And me. They checked in a week ago." Lemar was the manager of the Channel Marker Motel.

Perk glanced through the window toward the coral-colored motel visible across Sunset Way. "Old guy I've seen sitting on the terrace must be her husband—or father. Just sits up there all day."

The prospect of business did not excite Billy as it once had, even though he needed all he could get if his one source of steady income was to remain seaworthy. When Billy had acquired the boat it had seemed to him the answer to all his problems. A way to remain a Free Spirit while not risking starvation, a condition to which he had been nearly reduced more than once in his younger days. He had changed the boat's name from Evening Breeze to Pot-o'-Gold, a name which had became an ironical reminder of those vanishing dreams.

Precisely how he had come into possession of this antiquated pleasure craft needn't be gone into; enough to say that Billy's liberal education—none of which had been gleaned from books and which

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had begun when he left home at the age of sixteen—might be said to have earned him a bachelor's degree in the Fine Art of Hustling.

He was in fact a bachelor now, as he had been twice before in his life and which he had always remained by temperament. In the marital courses of his education he had flunked miserably. His first wife, Luci Ann, had ditched him in L.A.; his second, Bonny Lee, had soon tired of the vagabond life that had attracted her to Billy (along with his wide-spaced hazel eyes, cute little beard, and mustache, and his peculiarly golden-beige skin which made him look even in winter as if he were tanned all over). Since then Billy had enjoyed a long string of weekend honeymoons without the fettering complications of marriage.

Three years ago he had dropped anchor alongside the sleepy Gulf Coast town of Coquina Bay, lived the simple life aboard the Pot-o'-Gold and adopted the Rainbow Café as a home away from home. He drew most of his customers from the Channel Marker Motel, fishermen for the most part, although in the past—and not infrequently still—customers who had other things on their minds. When anyone asked Billy, usually along about midnight at the Rainbow bar, what he did for a living he would smile his intimate, rakish, sailor-boy smile, the light from the fake Tiffany lamps over the bar exaggerating the dimpled grooves in his lean, sunny-beige jaws, and reply, "I do favors for tourists, and stuff like that." Which was a broad enough explanation to open the way for any conversation that might develop. Perhaps the two phrases that he worked most often into these conversations and which capsulized his lifestyle and philosophy were Free Spirit and Anything Goes. "I'm a Free Spirit, man. With me Anything Goes."

There were days, however, of increasing frequency when Billy felt he was slowing down. The old knee injury from his cycling days still bothered him, nights of partying were followed by longer hours of recuperation, and when he looked in the mirror the lines around his eyes signaled the end of that perpetual boyhood he had somehow expected to enjoy. And unless the proposition sounded really profitable he was less and less eager to venture far from Coquina Bay.

"What am I gonna do, Perk? That old tub is bleedin' me dry with repairs."

"You're gonna hang in there, Billy, that's what. Our luck's due for a change any day now." Perk remained the perennial optimist.

Billy gave her a dimpled grin. "I remembered you said that two days before the hurricane made a shambles out of this place."

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"I survived, didn't I?"

"Oh, sure."

"Then cheer up," she said, switching on the perkiness for his benefit alone. Billy truly admired Perk and knew that she was still slaving away as dishwasher, barmaid, cook, and waitress to pay off the money she had borrowed to repair the Rainbow after the disaster of the hurricane.

In the evening when the colored lights were twinkling and the jukebox just wouldn't give up, strangers might have put the wrong construction on those hugs and kisses and amorous jokes that passed between Billy and Perk. The truth would have embarrassed the two of them had they chosen to recognize it: that Billy's affection for Perk was a kind of substitute for the love he had never been able to express toward the mother who had abandoned him when he was ten; while Perk secretly regarded Billy with the fondness she would have felt for the son whose death by drowning many years in the past had left scars visible only to Billy.

She had talked about it only once. "I can't blame Buddy for walking out. He felt responsible even though he wasn't. He couldn't bear this place after Chip died. But I felt we had to stay. We'd been so happy here, working together to make this joint pay off. But I think he wanted to get away from everything and everyone who reminded him of Chip. Even me. I let him go. How could I stop him?"

They had been hitting the tequila a bit heavily that night. "You wish you'd gone with him now?" Billy had asked her.

"By the time I found out where he was and wrote to him it was too late. Buddy was already married again."

Perk herself had married again but it had lasted less than six months.

"But you wait, Billy. I'm hangin' in there. My luck's gonna change any day now. Yours, too."

Billy, for his part, had lost hope. Small-time smuggling ventures had never brought him the dream score he imagined. Promises he had believed while sailing the Gulf under a full moon had vanished along with the rich patrons who had made them. Billy had stopped dreaming.

This particular morning Billy felt more than ordinarily glum. Last night had not been a raving success. His heart simply hadn't been in it, and maybe if he hadn't drunk quite so much tequila—

"Perk, I've made up my mind. I mean it this time. I'm gonna weigh anchor and move on down the Coast. That's where the action is."

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"Sure, Billy, sure."

"No, I mean it."

"Sure you do. More coffee?"

He knew she was right to doubt him. The Pot-o'-Gold would look like a piece of wreckage among all those glossy yachts, and even he wouldn't exactly glitter stacked up against the competition, those younger dudes with their Bahama tans and custom jeans.

Suddenly Perk nudged his arm. "Here comes your meal ticket."

Billy followed her gaze and watched the tall slim woman in a pale yellow pantsuit and floppy white hat strolling toward them from the direction of the Channel Marker. He shoveled down the remainder of his eggs and carried his coffee to one of the outside tables overlooking the water. The woman exchanged a few words with Perk and as she approached Billy he switched on his sailor-boy smile.

"Mr. Welcome?"

"Call me Billy."

The woman sat down across from him. Her own smile was mechanical and Billy felt that even if her eyes had not been hidden behind those big dark glasses they would have conveyed as little warmth. She was probably close to Perk's age but had clearly acquired no scars in the struggle of life. Her skin was clear, pale, her wheat-colored hair gathered loosely in a bun on her neck.

"I'm Mrs. Galloway." Her voice was finishing-school perfect.

"Pleased to meet you."

"We're staying at the Channel Marker." Her tone implied an apology, as if she might have added, "A dump, I know, but don't judge me by that."

"It's the only motel at this end of the Key," Billy acknowledged.

She looked down at her hands, twisting an enormous diamond ring to catch the morning sunlight. "My husband and I arrived last week."

"He likes to fish?"

She looked mildly annoyed, as if Billy were comparing her husband to one of those scruffy-looking old anglers lining the seawall. "No. Not since he was much younger, anyway. He's not well now."

"I'm sorry."

"He wanted to come to someplace quiet and off the beaten track. And I thought a short cruise, a few hours on the Gulf, would do him good."

Billy felt better. Mrs. Galloway was clearly more interested in the boat than in its skipper. "Well, there she is," he pointed toward the

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pier. "The Pot-o'-Gold." His tone was rather like Mrs. Galloway's when she mentioned the Channel Marker, but now her expression betrayed no disappointment. She inquired about rates, agreed they were reasonable.

The clothes, the manner and voice, the blinding diamond, the lady's scent—all spelled money. Billy was curious. "What made you choose Coquina Bay?"

"My husband's idea. He wanted to avoid people—people of our own sort."

Billy was not offended. Mrs. Galloway wasn't the first snob he had met by any means. He asked her when she would like to hire the boat. She said, "Could we leave abut nine tomorrow morning?"

"Whenever you say."

Billy watched her stroll back toward the motel, her figure as proud as the royal palms bordering the road. Then he went back inside.

"Did she hire you?" Perk asked, and then, although the jest was too familiar to get a rise out of him, "Or the boat?"

"The lady has a husband, smartie. Who's not well."

"Then I was right. Must be the old gent I've seen over there on the terrace. Be nice to her, Billy. She might soon be a widow. And I know how you feel aout rich widows."

"Yeah. Well, she turned me off."

"Why?"

"Just readin' the waves, Perk." Which was Billy's term for human vibrations. It would not be a fun cruise, he decided, and was glad, having grown tired of pulling out his little box of tricks for the tourists, just as Perk was tired of putting on her good-time-girl act. Even in Coquina Bay all that could grow tiresome when it didn't lead to a starring Role.

The sun rose next morning into the usual blue sky over a glassy smooth Bay. Billy sipped his coffee while keeping an eye on the Channel Marker, from where presently a pale blue Continental approached the café, drawing sedately into the parking lot facing the seawall.

"So you drove down," he said pleasantly, opening the car door for Mrs. Galloway to emerge from the driver's seat.

"Down?"

"From the North. Whereabouts in New York are you folks from?"

She gave him a sharp glance. "How did you know that?"

Billy grinned. "Your license plate."

"Oh, of course. We're from Manhattan. And Westchester."

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She wore tailored white deckpants and a burnt-orange blouse, a sun vizor and dark glasses. Galloway himself was a short withered-looking man who yet struck Billy, helping him from the car, as once having had a quite powerful frame on which the yellowish skin now hung loosely. A straw hat was pulled low on his brow and he too wore dark glasses. He leaned on his wife's arm as they moved slowly past the café and out onto the pier.

On the boat Billy settled Galloway into a deck chair in the stern. "There's champagne, white wine, coffee aboard," he told them. "And if you care to I can make up some sandwiches later."

"Thank you, young man," said Galloway in a frail voice. Billy climbed into his seat at the helm, started the engines, and navigated his way through the channel toward the open sea. Gulls wheeled and cried overhead, their wings sharply cut against the enameled blue sky. Occasionally Billy glanced at his passengers who sat with their backs to him looking toward the shoreline.

A half hour later, out in the Gulf, Mrs. Galloway came up and seated herself beside Billy.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Fine, yes. My husband is enjoying it. I knew he would."

"How long would you like to stay out?"

"Until noon, at least, unless he gets tired."

"Let me know if you'd like anything to drink."

"Thank you." She remained beside him, her eyes straight ahead. Presently she said, "It would appear your boat could use a good overhaul."

"Sure could, ma'am."

"Have you had her long?"

"Few years."

"Have you ever had any accidents?"

He glanced at her profile, as hard and bright against the sky as that ring flashing on her slim finger. "Accidents?"

"Collisions—things like that."

"Luckily, no." And then, with a grin: "I'm no novice. You don't have to worry."

"I'm not worried. And I know what you are."

He looked at her but she didn't meet his gaze. She said, "I took the trouble of making inquiries about you. And your boat, of course."

"I'm glad I passed inspection."

"Oh, you did. I decided you were perfect."

He began to get a funny feeling about this dame. Women had

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talked to him like this before, but usually not in their husbands' presence, even though Galloway couldn't hear their words. But then she confused him by saying, "No one's ever fallen overboard?"

"No," he laughed.

"What would you do if someone did?"

He paused a moment before answering this extraordinary question. "Rescue them, of course."

"Suppose they didn't want to be rescued."

"In that situation everyone wants to be rescued."

"My husband would not." Her tone was unemotional.

"How's that again?"

At this she removed her dark glasses and gave him a direct look. Even narrowed against the glitter of the sea light her eyes were spectacular, wide, slightly tilted, and of a deep violet hue.

"Tell me, Billy Welcome. Are you a happy man? Contented, I mean."

"As much as most, I guess. More than some. I'm a Free Spirit."

"What about the future?"

"That'll take care of itself."

"Will it? Surely you must have ambitions."

"Doesn't everyone?"

"What are yours?"

"Simple enough. Live like I do now, only have a bigger boat. Something classier, you know."

"Boats are expensive."

"Don't I know it."

Her tone became confidential—not warmer, but more intimate. "Billy, I'm going to say something and I want you to listen very carefully. My husband is a very sick man—I'm sure you can see that. In fact, he's dying."

Billy looked sharply around. Mrs. Galloway laughed. "Don't be alarmed. He isn't about to drop dead on your boat."

"Why are you telling me this?"

She held up her wrist, the sun glinting on the diamond-studded face of her watch. "At precisely twelve noon my husband is going to jump overboard."

Billy felt as if he had been rudely keel-hauled in the space of a second. "Like hell."

"I'm quite serious."

"Then you're also nuts. Or he is. Or you both are."

"Please. Just listen to me. This can be the most important day of

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your life, Billy. Welcome. My husband has been ill for years. He's suffered terribly. Not only from the illness but from the endless, hopeless treatments. Look at him, Billy. How old would you say my husband is?"

"I don't know. Seventy? Seventy-five?"

"He's fifty-two. And he's dying. He wants to die. Quickly. He knows his case is hopeless, with nothing ahead but even worse pain."

Billy had been involved in a wide variety of human situations, but never in one quite so bizarre as this.

"If he wanted to kill himself why come all the way down here?"

"Because he chose to. He's always loved the sea."

"It's practically at his doorstep in Manhattan."

"I mean the tropic sea. We've spent every winter in the South. Usually in the Islands. It's where he wanted to die. With the warm sun on his face, under a blue sky."

"So why do it on my boat?"

"I told you. No one knows us here. And I can't explain my husband's whims. I never could. As for you, well, I've learned a lot about you in the past week. Very discreetly, don't worry."

She glanced behind her, then reached across and traced the words *Anything Goes* with her finger across Billy's chest. "Anything to make a buck, right? Smuggling, hustling—oh, you're rather a legend in your way in Coquina Bay."

"Maybe so. But, lady, I've never done anything like this."

"No one is asking you to *do* anything. Just mind your own business. And there is nothing illegal about it."

"Abetting a suicide is legal? Come on, lady, I'm not that dumb."

"And since when have you been that fussy? But then I think we can resolve things with your conscience quite easily. You could do a lot with fifty thousand dollars, couldn't you?"

Billy stared at her. "You're saying you'd give me fifty grand to pretend I didn't know what was going down—if you'll pardon the expression. To let him drown without trying to save him?"

"It does make it easier, doesn't it, Billy?" Her smile was cajoling, cynical, utterly self-confident.

Thoughts, plans, dreams all seethed through Billy's mind. The dream score. And all he had to do was shut his eyes and ears and collect. It was too easy. Much too easy.

"Why even tell me about it?" he asked her. "I don't keep my eyes behind me when I'm up here. He could jump and I wouldn't even

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know what happened if you didn't yell. Come on, lady, there's more to it than that."

"I said my husband plans to jump overboard. Suppose you *should* see him. And told the authorities. I wouldn't collect a penny of his insurance. But if it was an accident—I'll inherit a decent amount from my husband, but a million dollars in insurance would be a nice bonus. I have expensive tastes, Billy."

You're a greedy bitch is what you are, Billy felt like telling her. He felt sorry for the poor guy slumped in the deck chair.

"Surely he must be aware of that," Billy said.

"He is. But I think he'd love to cheat me out of that insurance money. I'll tell you the truth. I can't be sure but I think he may have guessed I have a lover. Oh, don't look at me like that. I'm not exactly over the hill and he hasn't been a real husband to me in years. But we've pretended. We've made believe everything is perfect between us. Lately, though, I can't quite explain it, maybe it's the sickness. He's changed. Dwells on the past. And he's suspicious of everything I do, everyone I talk to. I'm not sure I can even trust him in this—I mean that he isn't playing some game with me."

"You've lost me."

"I really thought his mind was gone when he told me quite bluntly what he planned to do. When I tried to reason with him he threatened to cut me out of his will if I breathed a word of it to anyone or refused to help him. And yet I'm not sure I can trust him. He might even change his mind at the last minute. Suicides do, you know."

"Suppose he does."

Her violet eyes settled on his face. "He mustn't. I couldn't go on like this without losing my mind."

"You mean you *want* him to do it?"

"Kill himself? Of course not. Haven't you been listening? I want him to fall overboard. That is, I want us—you and I—to make that very clear to the authorities. That it was an accident."

"You didn't answer my question. Suppose he does change his mind."

She spoke now in an urgent whisper. "He mustn't. He mustn't. We mustn't let him. We must give him the courage—if his own should fail."

Billy replied coldly, "I get the picture. You're not promising me all that bread to keep quiet. You want me to make sure he goes overboard."

"Wrong. I didn't come down here to hire a killer. I simply want

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you to be in the cabin fixing some sandwiches or something at noon. I want you to stay there until I call you. By then it will be too late for you to—rescue him."

"Lady, I've met some cold-blooded dames in my day, but you take the prize. I'm surprised you haven't had the poor guy stiffed before now."

She removed the vizor and let her hair blow free in the wind. "I won't say it hasn't crossed my mind. I'm desperate enough. But I'm no fool. Some people may get away with murder. I'm sure I wouldn't, even if I were so inclined."

"And if I tell you to go to hell and report this whole crazy conversation to the cops?"

She smiled. "*That* chance I'm willing to take. But I think you're smarter than that, Billy. Welcome. I know a hustler when I meet one."

A jumble of thoughts raced through Billy's brain. If he went along with this weird proposition he would be set for life—a Free Spirit in every sense of the word.

"Lady, something tells me I'd never see a cent of that fifty grand. You say you know a hustler when you meet one. Well, so do I."

She laughed. "I wouldn't expect you to trust me, Billy. You don't have to. I'm prepared to pay you in advance." After a quick look behind her she drew the ring from her finger. "This little bauble is worth a conservative fifty thousand. Take my word for it. He never bought me junk. It's yours, now. For doing absolutely nothing but backing up my story."

His hands remained clamped to the wheel.

"Take it, Billy."

He reached for the ring and examined it. Billy had been around the well-heeled ladies long enough to know the genuine article when he saw it.

She waited. He did not return the ring. Presently she laughed softly. "You've got at least an hour or so to think about it, Billy. Okay if I bring up a bottle of champagne?"

"Help yourself."

Billy kept his gaze fixed on the horizon, his hands on the wheel. Mrs. Galloway's proposition created an ethical dilemma beyond the scope of his experience. Galloway was dying, Billy didn't for a moment doubt that. But what if he did change his mind about killing himself at the last minute? Billy knew that he himself would never push the poor guy overboard. Anything Goes, sure—anything but

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murder. Murder was not the sort of moral lapse that could be erased with a hot bath and a night's sleep.

And if Galloway did take the high dive of his own volition, Billy knew he himself could live with that. Everyone had a right to exercise his free spirit. But could he go down into the cabin at noon, close the hatch behind him, and leave Galloway to the tender mercy of his iceberg wife in case he should have a change of heart?

He had still not resolved this conflict when, at fifteen minutes before twelve, Mrs. Galloway called up to him. He turned. Galloway was still slumped in his deck chair, eyes on the sea.

"Billy? Would you kindly make us a few sandwiches? This sea air has given us both an appetite."

Billy set the automatic pilot. The sea was clear in all directions. He went down into the cabin, shutting the hatch behind him, and started mechanically preparing the sandwiches. As he did so he came to a decision. If Galloway chose to jump overboard to escape the agonies of a certain and lingering death, so be it. He had the right. But if he heard a cry for help, and if he went on deck and saw Galloway floundering in the water, wanting to be rescued, then he would rescue him. And after that it would be their business what they did with their lives. Not his.

He looked at his watch. 11:47.

11:48.

11:49.

What was that? Did he hear a faint cry? A splash? No, it was his imagination. He tried to believe the woman was mad, her entire story a sick fantasy. But when he pressed his hand to his thigh and felt the hardness of the diamond in his jeans pocket he knew that was real. That was no fantasy. While the dreams, the opportunities, the miracle of what he could achieve with it left him shaken.

He arranged the sandwiches on a tray and opened the hatch.

Noon.

He climbed the steps to the deck, desperately wanting the man to be there, exactly as Billy had left him, slouched in his chair.

But he was not.

Galloway was not in his chair. He stood, his body swaying, bent forward, his hands propped on the back of the chair, his face ghastly in the sunlight.

"My wife—oh, God, my wife—"

Billy looked around. The woman was not at the helm, was nowhere in sight. He rushed to the gunwale as Galloway kept muttering,

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"I stood up, felt dizzy. She—she tried to steady me. She fell. She fell overboard!"

Billy's eyes swept the water but nothing disturbed the glassy surface except the long diminishing ribbon of the boat's wake. He turned and met Galloway's eyes looking straight into his, and what Billy fancied he saw in those dying eyes was not the reflection of the words his lips were mouthing but instead a look very much like satisfaction, a look in which there lay no hint of grief or shock of horror.

And then, lowering his gaze, Billy saw something else: the champagne bottle lay shattered on the deck beside Galloway's chair. Once more the two men looked into each other's eyes. Neither spoke. And then Billy knew. He knew what had happened, or at least what must have happened.

He gripped Galloway by the shoulders and eased him back into his chair, and then for the next half hour he navigated the boat in ever widening circles around the spot where Mrs. Galloway must have entered the water. He called the Coast Guard, reported the accident and their position, then headed for Pinella Point, the nearest port, where he made his report to the authorities.

It was there that the story broke, a far bigger story than Billy expected when it became known that Galloway was really Stuart Brinkman, a very big name in the financial circles of New York. Billy avoided the publicity by escaping the reporters and setting off down the coast. He needed space and solitude. He had a lot to think about.

Most of his waking hours were spent reflecting on what had happened aboard the Pot-o'-Gold that morning. Had Stuart Brinkman actually intended to kill himself? Or had he lost his nerve and when his wife tried to push him overboard had he grabbed up the bottle and struck her?

Or had he nurtured a plan of his own, just as devious as his wife's? At times Billy almost made up his mind to tell the whole story to the police, but then he would take out that huge rock and staring into it as if it were a multifaceted crystal ball he would see a future he had all but abandoned as a hopeless dream.

He scarcely ever went ashore for longer than it took to replenish his supplies and drop a card to Perk. A month and a half passed before he once more dropped anchor in Coquina Bay.

"Mornin', Perk."

"Billy! How you doin'?"

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They hugged and kissed across the counter. "You got my cards, then?"

"Sure, but I didn't know where to send an answer. You said you were always on the move."

"Yeah, I needed time to think. And plan. I made up my mind, Perk. I'm movin' on down the Coast. I made a big score. Really big. I'm gonna get me a new boat. Got it all picked out."

"Gee, Billy, that's terrific. And, honey, hold on to your stool. Have I ever got some news for *you*."

"Good news, from the look on your face."

"Billy, it hit me like a ton of mackerel when I read the papers. The guy you took out that day—Galloway? That wasn't his real name."

"I know."

"But you didn't know *who* he was. Buddy! He was *Buddy*."

"Buddy?"

"*My* Buddy. Stuart Brinkman. Thank God no one knows."

It took a while for Billy to digest this. "You never told me Buddy's real name. You never said much about him."

"And *I* never knew he'd made it big in New York. I hadn't heard from him in—oh, ages. But that's not all. When he died—"

"When who died?"

"Buddy! Oh, my stars, don't you *ever* read the papers? Buddy died in New York two weeks after it happened. The accident on your boat, to his wife. He took an overdose of sleeping pills."

Stunned, Billy listened to the rest. "Poor old Buddy. If I'd ever *dreamed* it was him I saw huddled up there on the terrace at the Channel Marker. To think after all these years he came back here . . . I wonder why. You think maybe he never really did stop caring about his Perk? Well, I guess I know he didn't."

Her eyes shone as big and bright as the diamond Billy had sold in Miami. "Three days ago I got a letter from Buddy's lawyers. Are you ready for this, Billy? Buddy left me a hundred thousand dollars in his will! Honest John. I can show you the letter."

Billy's smile broadened into a face-splitting grin. Then he cleared his throat, assumed a truculent expression. "Is that any excuse for crummy service in this joint? Where are my eggs, Perk? And pour me some coffee before I take my business elsewhere."

She snapped to attention. "Aye, aye, sir. Comin' up!"

He called after her as she disappeared into the kitchen, "Perk? Make it a double."

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a *NEW* detective story by

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It is 1875 and Detective Ambrose Ganelon is still visiting St. Petersburg, Russia, still locked in mortal combat with his arch-rival, the elusive Dr. Ludwig Fong. The invisible hand of Dr. Fong is secretly at work in another baffling mystery in which darkness is the key. What is "the only thing you can and must look for in the dark?"

THE PRIEST WITHOUT A SHADOW

by JAMES POWELL

The secret drawer in detective Ambrose Ganelon's desk in San Sebastiano contained a ledger bound in green buckram in which he recorded all the details of the many plots and continuing machinations of that evil genius, Dr. Ludwig Fong. The founder of the Ganelon Agency spent many long hours pondering this ledger, trying to decipher Fong's grand plan—and he was sure there was one—from these bits and pieces. If Ganelon's magnificent brain ever complained from weariness and needed to be spurred onward, the detective had only to turn to the inside front cover of the ledger where he had pasted the only known daguerreotype of his archrival.

The daguerreotype was enscribed: "To Ambrose Ganelon, a souvenir of Dr. Ludwig Fong who will never forget you. Christmas, 1855." Fong is shown standing with his elbow on a Doric column such as photographers provided before a backdrop painted to resemble the Rialto Bridge in Venice. Fong is a large man in a sealskin waistcoat, his watch chain strung with ornaments. His hair is oiled and wavy for he had not yet taken to shaving his round head to

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accentuate the roll of fat over the back of his collar. He wore his famous long black mustache turned up in the Prussian manner.

The manipulation of this mustache was the man's principle trick of disguise. By turning it down, curling the ends, or brushing it horizontally he was instantly Oriental, Mediterranean, or Latin American. But it was Fong's smile that held the eye, a magnificent thing, all teeth and curve. Only when you considered the state of the photographic art of the day and realized that Fong had to stand there motionless with that smile on his lips for thirty minutes did a chill touch your spine and the inscription ring with menace.

Now, twenty years later, Ganelon stared into the fireplace of the reading room of St. Petersburg's Aeolian Club and saw that smile again. He shuddered as if from the cold, threw aside the morning newspaper in his lap, stood up, and turned his back to the flames. His short stout frame took more of the heat than politeness would have allowed had the room's other occupants not been dozing in their chairs. The newspaper account of the Turkish adventures in the Balkans made it clear that Fong's hold over the capricious Sultan Abdulaziz had not diminished one tittle. Here were more entries for Ganelon's ledger.

As the detective brooded over these developments, his young friend Nicholas Andreyevitch came into the reading room dressed for the outdoors, his face as white as the snow on the tips of his shoes, his eyes wide and unseeing.

Ganelon, in the Russian capital to be inducted into the Imperial Society of Amateur Woodwind Virtuosi, had sought out this young composer, whose first opera had recently been published in a delightful transcription for the detective's instrument, the oboe.

Nicholas Andreyevitch stood for a moment as though transfixed. Then he saw the ormolu clock on the fireplace mantel and a puzzled look crossed his face. Abruptly he laughed out loud, setting the disturbed club members to muttering. "Ambrose Ivan-Yakovlevitch, the very man I need!" exclaimed the composer. With the color rushing back into his face he led the elderly detective from the room.

A report that Ambrose Ganelon had allowed himself to be led anywhere by anyone would have been met by incredulous laughter in San Sebastiano. There, on the rare occasion the detective left his formidable armchair in the rue Blondin he went well-armed with scowls and dark, forbidding looks. Nannies were known to scream if their young charges came within striking distance of his sturdy cane as he passed. But Prince Feinhart himself had requested Gan-

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elon to try for a courteous tone during his visit to St. Petersburg lest he offend the Romanovs and provoke a war between the Russian Empire and tiny San Sebastiano, a conflict which might have a less triumphant ending for the Principality than the one with the Kingdom of Sardinia, popularly known as the War of Ganelon's Sneer. Remembering the word given his Prince, the detective allowed himself to be led.

As they crossed the hall to the card room where several tables of whist were already in progress, Ganelon said, "My young friend, just now you looked as if you'd seen a ghost."

Nicholas Andreyevitch nodded. "Or something very nearly like it," he said with a nervous laugh. Sitting Ganelon down in the wingchair in a quiet corner, he took off his overcoat and drew up a more modest chair for himself. "I pride myself in being a modern man," he said. "But what I thought I saw literally left my brain reeling. Let me tell you about it. A longish story. But there's a mystery to it."

"Good," said Ganelon for his St. Petersburg visit had been prolonged, leaving him restive and eager for a riddle to solve.

Taking a deep breath, the composer told his story. Since his appointment as Inspector of Naval Bands last year he and his wife had been looking for a house to rent. Last month they found the perfect place on the Moika Quai. A fashionable address, a reasonable rent, and most important, his wife fell in love with the house on the spot. He signed the lease. But several days before they were to move in a terrible murder took place in that empty house.

A workman of some description or another was stabbed to death, his head severed from his body and carried away. Fortunately neither Nicholas Andreyevitch's wife nor her aunt Marfa Petrovna who lived with them are drawn to such stories in the newspaper. Marfa Petrovna was a devout woman with a deep superstitious bent. She would never have considered passing a night in a house where she knew a murder had been committed.

The landlord blamed the whole thing on the house having been vacant so long. He replaced all the locks on the windows and doors. Remembering how much his wife loved the house, and not believing in ghosts or lightning striking twice, Nicholas Andreyevitch decided not to mention the murdered man. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

So they moved into their new home. But, of course, as he should have expected, within a week on her way to market Marfa Petrovna

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made the acquaintance of a talkative neighbor woman who revealed the whole business. Marfa Petrovna returned home quite terrorized and refused to spend another night in the house unless the composer got a certain Father Egon to come that very night and exorcise the dark forces which she was sure possessed the place. Apparently this priest was known in the quarter for his success in such matters. The busybody neighbor couldn't say too much about him. She also mentioned that he never received visitors until after nightfall. This last seemed to make a great impression on Marfa Petrovna.

Nicholas Andreyevitch sighed. "And so, feeling sheepish and unmodern, I found myself mounting a dismal staircase with a rope bannister and no light to guide me but a candle stub on a cracked saucer provided by a filthy creature who proudly claimed to be the concierge. I found the priest's doorway on the topmost floor. When I knocked a voice told me to leave the candle on a shelf outside in the hallway and enter.

"The room was dark, the curtains were drawn. I did not close the door. From the hall light I made out the shape of a man in a conical clerical hat sitting at a deal table in the corner. He was bearded and had a mole the size of a twenty-kopek piece on his left cheek. As he offered me a seat I noticed his voice was weary and his accent from the South, perhaps Turkistan. Deciding to deal with him as I might a tradesman, I explained our predicament and asked for his rates.

"He said, yes, he knew of my house and the terrible crime committed there. Yes, he said, he thought he could cast out the dark forces within those walls, though it might take time. He would begin that very night. 'Tell your Marfa Petrovna she has nothing to fear,' he said. Then he asked me to describe the location of the rooms in the house, explaining that he would have to construct a pentagram of prayer—his words not mine—on each floor.

"Finally this Father Egon gave me instructions which he insisted must be carried out to the letter. That evening at ten o'clock we were to unlock our front door and extinguish every light except the candle burning in front of the ikon in the music room on the first floor. Then everyone in the house was to gather in that room behind closed doors and wait until he told them they could come out. Telling myself I would go along with the man's mumbo-jumbo because I loved my wife and respected her aunt, I recovered my candle in the hall and found my way back down the stairs.

"Marfa Petrovna insisted on hearing every detail of my interview with the priest. I described my visit, adding in the hope of discred-

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iting the man that for all his priestly airs he had forgotten to light the candle before his own ikon. But every detail of my story only added to her delight. 'Oh, I just knew it,' she whispered respectfully. 'Father Egon is one of them. One of the Doomed Saints.' "

Nicholas Andreyevitch cleared his throat with embarrassment. "The less fashionable folk tell stories of a breed of holy priests who have sold their souls to the devil in return for powers to heal and exorcise the minor demons, sacrificing their own souls to be of help to their fellowmen. Tradition has it that the devil takes their shadow to seal the bargain. Poor Marfa Petrovna believes Father Egon is one of these priests."

"And what do you believe?" asked Ganelon.

"I suspected treachery, of course," said the young man. "I moved the silver and my collection of Oriental enameled brass pieces into the music room where we were to stay. I also paid one of the policemen at the embassy next door to keep an eye on my entrance in case we were dealing with people who were after the furniture. That night my wife, Marfa Petrovna, Trifon the footman, and myself gathered in the dim music room. On the stroke of twelve I heard the front door open and close. For the next hour there were the sounds of someone walking about downstairs. Then I heard Father Egon's voice on the other side of the door. 'I have done much,' he said, 'but still have more to do. I will return at the same time tomorrow night. Please remain where you are until I have left the house.' We did as he asked. Marfa Petrovna would hardly have allowed it to be otherwise."

"And when you came out was anything stolen?"

"Not a thing," said Nicholas Andreyevitch. "Not that visit or any of the others. The next night we heard him in the hall and on the staircase. For the next three times after that he went upstairs. Last night when he spoke through the door he told us the end was near. I was happy to hear that. I confess I'd hate to have people learn I was letting an excorcist creep about the house."

Ganelon nodded. "Proceed with your story."

"Well, nightly hocus-pocus or not, I found my work going well. This morning I was so deep into my new composition that I lost all sense of time. Then a sudden drowsiness overcame me. Hoping to blow the cobwebs out of my head by a brisk walk in the weather I put on my things and set forth. The day was clear and cold. I hadn't walked far before my creative powers returned and I began to work on the composition again in my head.

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"I don't know how long I walked and I was quite oblivious of my surroundings until a near accident with a cart brought me back to earth. I found myself standing almost at the door of Father Egon's dingy tenement. And who should I see coming down the street toward me all dressed up like a mujik, a common workman, in boots, red shirt, and sheepskin but Father Egon himself, cheek mole and all. In broad daylight. He passed by without recognizing me. As he did I looked down and discovered to my horror that the man had no shadow.

"I staggered away from that encounter with my beliefs in shambles. I knew I was only five minutes away from the Aeolian. I needed to tell my story to someone, so I came here. I was delighted to see your bodyguard, Sergeant Lucas, talking to the hall porter. I knew I'd find you in the reading room and—"

"—and when you came in you saw the clock. It said five minutes after twelve. You'd met your man at noon when even the humblest creature had no shadow."

"Such a tremendous relief," agreed Nicholas Andreyevitch with a sheepish grin. "Like having your sanity given back to you. But, of course, the question still remains: is our night visitor a priest or a mujik? Am I dealing with a man of the cloth, a saint or a scoundrel? Ambrose Ivan-Yakovlevitch, what is going on in my house?"

"The only way to find out is to invite me to wait with you when he comes calling tonight."

Early that evening Ganelon delivered a paper on the life of Marc-Anton Prattmann, San Sebastiano's great oboe maker, before the Tsarevitch Alexis and the fellows of the Imperial Society. It was after 9:30 when his droshky stopped before the house on the Quai Moika. Swathed in fur, the detective stepped down from the conveyance and his bodyguard, Sergeant Lucas of the San Sebastiano police, followed after him.

Ganelon stood in the falling snow on the sidewalk for a moment. Nicholas Andreyevitch's new home was one of a block of townhouses. Its immediate neighbor to the west was dark and possessed a hefty door and formidable shutters. During his brief visit to the police that afternoon Ganelon had learned that it belonged to a notorious moneylender. An embassy bearing the coat of arms of Montenegro stood to the east. It was ablaze with lights, no doubt the result of the dangerous Balkan situation. Two policemen were stamping their feet before the doorway.

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Sergeant Lucas looked at Ganelon and nodded up at the moneylender's attic. "They call St. Petersburg the Venice of the North, sir," he said. "Like its counterpart much of the city is built on piles. In Venice the dungeons and the strongrooms are in the attics."

Ganelon decided his promise to the Prince didn't apply to Lucas. He snorted and mounted the steps to his friend's house.

Trifon the footman took their coats and ushered them into the music room where the composer and his wife greeted them and introduced Marfa Petrovna, a fluttering, broad-faced woman on her way upstairs to extinguish the lights. Ganelon asked if he might accompany her.

If Marfa Petrovna seemed one of life's timid victims, Ganelon soon discovered she was made of flint whenever she thought her religious beliefs were being questioned. She would accept no other explanation of Father Egon but the supernatural one. As she reverently blew out the ikon candles in each room and closed the door, Ganelon inserted a short length of matchstick between door and door jamb. Each time Marfa Petrovna scoffed audibly.

They finished their business on the upper floors and took the staircase downward. In a French which suggested her tutor had come from Provence, she said, "You are not a believer, Mr. Ganelon. I mean no offense by that. But a man has been brutally slain here and his body desecrated. Until Father Egon has done his holy work the poor creature's soul will find no rest."

"I do believe in the existence of saints, Madam," said Ganelon, as they reached the bottom of the stairs. "And of sinners."

They entered the music room and took their places. Nicholas Andreyevitch's wife sat down at the piano and, as promised, began to play a new composition by a friend of theirs, a musical impression of some paintings by an artist their friend admired. Nicholas Andreyevitch sat on the bench beside her, turning the music in the meager light from the ikon candle. Marfa Petrovna knelt at prayer. Trifon sat erect in the darkness by the door, dozing with his palms on his knees.

As a churchbell marked the hour the street door opened and closed. The piano fell silent. Marfa Petrovna crossed herself. Sergeant Lucas, seated behind Ganelon's chair, half turned to face the door and slipped a hand inside his jacket. Footsteps—one boot had a creak—passed the music room. A board groaned on the staircase. Then there was silence.

"Please continue your delightful playing, Madam," urged Ganelon

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politely. But when his hostess insisted that the mysterious priest's arrival had broken her concentration, he wasn't unhappy. "Then with your aunt's indulgence," he said, "let us pass the time by considering mundane explanations for the riddle in which we find ourselves. I believe Lucas has a theory. Nicholas Andreyevitch?" The composer nodded. "Good. Now I find several pecularities about this case and I would like to see how your theories dispose of them. First, there is the question of the severed head."

Marfa Petrovna interrupted. "But the poor man was killed for his gold teeth, I would have thought that was obvious."

Nicholas Andreyevitch said respectfully, "I think, Auntie, that a common laborer would hardly have gold teeth. Besides, the money scattered around would indicate that robbery wasn't the motive."

"Proceed," said Ganelon.

"Suppose it's like the Forty Thieves without Ali Baba," said the composer. "A gang of thieves have been using the vacant house as a den. Perhaps their leader has hidden their considerable loot in a secret place here, a place only he knows. There is a falling out over cards. The chief receives a fatal knife thrust. Fearing the police will recognize the dead man and realize what the house was being used for, the thieves carry off his head. They intend to return when the police investigation has died down and retrieve the hidden booty. But in the meantime we move in. Their new leader has to manufacture all this Father Egon humbug to get into the house."

Marfa Petrovna snorted.

Ganelon looked at her approvingly. Since snorting was forbidden to him he welcomed someone who could do it in his place. "Among other things, my young friend," said the detective, "your theory doesn't explain the identity card that the police found beside the body, a bit of information they withheld in the hope it would help them in the case. The card belongs to a man named Zelinov, a former Ministry of Transportation clerk who was dismissed for arrogant behavior toward a superior. According to his considerable police file, Zelinov turned to a life of crime, specializing in safecracking. This Zelinov hasn't returned to his rooms since the day the body was found. Perhaps Lucas has an explanation for the identity card."

Lucas' voice was sure of itself. "The attic was being used to tunnel through to the moneylender's attic strongroom next door. Zelinov was one of the gang. The way I see it they were almost through the wall when a derelict looking for a place to get out of the cold stumbled in on them and had to be killed. Zelinov knows the police are breath-

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ing down his neck and he thinks, now here's a chance to throw some sand in their eyes. He cuts off the man's head and exchanges identity cards. Then they conceal their work in the attic and leave until the heat's off. But when they come back you've moved in. So Zelinov becomes Father Egon, spends a night on the first floor for the sake of appearances, then tackles the end of the tunnel all on his own. Tonight he's up there throwing the gold down to his buddies out back."

"And what about the turned-out pockets?" demanded Ganelon.

"He was looking for a map to where the loot was hidden?" asked Nicholas Andreyevitch.

Ganelon looked at Marfa Petrovna and was gratified when she snorted again. He looked at Lucas.

"Zelinov went through the guy's pockets hunting for his identity card," said the policeman.

"If you're looking for something you stop when you find it," said Ganelon. "All the pockets were turned inside out."

"Then it was in the last pocket," insisted Lucas.

Ganelon shook his head. "The killer was looking for something else. He didn't find it. I also believe the victim was Zelinov."

"Why go to the trouble of cutting off his head and then leave the identity card behind?" asked Lucas.

"To conceal the man's assumed identity," said Ganelon. "Zelinov's known locally, but by another name."

"But why the darkness?" demanded Marfa Petrovna. "Why dig tunnels or search for hidden treasure in the dark?"

Ganelon bowed at the woman. "Gentlemen," he said, "there's the nub of the matter. Who can give us a plausible explanation of the curious fact that Father Egon insisted the house be in darkness?" Ganelon gazed around him. No one spoke. Nicholas Andreyevitch shrugged. Lucas spread his hands hopelessly. Ganelon looked back at Marfa Petrovna who wore a triumphant smile.

"Simple," she said. "Father Egon is who I say he is. He has no shadow. He goes in darkness for humility's sake. He doesn't want us to see how much he's given up for us. And also because the sight of his own shadowless form is a thorn in his heart, a constant reminder of his own damnation."

At that moment there was a step on the stairs. Then a boot creaked in the hall. A voice on the other side of the door said, "Praise be, the evil spirits have departed and the soul of our slain brother has been laid to rest. In payment for my services put whatever amount of

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money you deem fit in whatever poor box you choose. And pray for me. Please remain where you are for five minutes."

When that time had elapsed, Marfa Petrovna announced she was setting out at once for the local church whose sacristan would not dare refuse to admit her no matter how late the hour. When she could not be dissuaded, Nicholas Andreyevitch's wife insisted on going along as well. The composer ordered Trifon to accompany them.

When they had gone Ganelon said, "Your aunt is a shrewd woman who sees to the heart of things. But I didn't want to continue the discussion in front of her. Let her believe that Father Egon is who she thinks he is."

Ganelon lit a candle and led the way out into the hall and up the stairs. "Yes," he said, "as your aunt observed, darkness is the most important element of this case. Our fake priest is looking for the only thing you can and must look for in the dark. He was looking for light. Now let us see where he found it."

Ganelon made his way down the second-floor hallway, examining the rug at each door. He stopped and picked up a bit of matchstick on the right-hand side. Laying a finger across his lips, the detective opened the door, revealing a deep walk-in linen closet with shelves on all three walls. Handing the candle to Lucas and signaling him to shield the flame with his hand, Ganelon stepped in to the far wall.

He reached up and removed a stack of crisply folded tea towels on the topmost shelf. He replaced the stack and removed the next. A coin of light appeared on the ceiling about two feet back from the wall. Ganelon motioned that a chair be brought in from the hall. He climbed on the chair, raised himself on tiptoe, and squinted one eye. The small hole angled downward and outward through the wall.

He could see the corner of a black desk, a fringe of rug, and a low laquered cabinet against a wall. He could also hear muffled voices.

He replaced the towels, got down from the chair, and returned to the hall. Closing the linen closet door Ganelon said, "Nicholas Andreyevitch, I suggest you write your wife a note telling her you've been called away on my account and not to wait up for you. After that we shall all pay a visit to the Montenegrin Embassy."

A large army officer with a square jaw and a fierce black mustache matched Ganelon scowl for scowl before handing his visiting card over to a liveried attendant who vanished up the staircase with it.

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Almost at once the Montenegrin Ambassador, an elegantly dressed man with dainty feet, was hurrying down the steps with a smile and an outstretched hand to escort the great detective and his party up to his office. As they went the Ambassador expressed his pleasure at meeting a holder of the Order of the Black Wolf, his country's highest decoration which Ganelon had received for services to the royal house.

In the second-floor hallway people were hurrying from room to room. "We've been quite busy these last two weeks because of the Turkish threat to the Balkans," explained the Ambassador. "In addition, the fortnightly diplomatic pouch arrives by courier this evening and we must prepare the contents of the pouch that the couriers will take back with them tomorrow."

He ushered the visitors into his office. On the wall behind his large dark desk hung a full-length portrait of the current Prince of Montenegro, a dashing figure in a red waistcoat embroidered with gold, a red sash stuffed with pistols and cruel-looking yataghans, baggy blue breeches, a black cap embroidered with gold, and a long blue cape. The portrait's contemptuous and belligerent stare made the viewer avert his gaze which may be why no one had noticed that the left eye was a hole instead of canvas.

"Please have a seat, gentlemen," said the Ambassador. "Let me offer you some of our fine Montenegrin araqui." The low lacquered cabinet contained a fine array of bottles. The Ambassador toasted his visitors with the date brandy and took his place behind the desk. "Now what can I do for you and your friends, Mr. Ganelon?"

"Let me be of service to Montenegro as I have been in the past," said the detective.

The Ambassador frowned. "Please go on."

"You said a diplomatic pouch would be arriving this evening. Tell me how you will deal with it."

The Ambassador considered the request for a moment. Then he shrugged and said, "Captain Stanko whom you met downstairs will meet the couriers at the railroad station at eleven thirty and bring them here. The seal on the pouch will be examined to make sure it hasn't been tampered with. Then the pouch will be opened and the contents checked against the enclosed 'bill of lading,' so to speak. A matter of minutes. Then, considering the lateness of the hour, the contents will be placed in the safe to be dealt with in an appropriate manner in the morning."

Ganelon pointed at the lacquered cabinet. "That safe?"

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Too astonished to deny the truth of Ganelon's words, the Ambassador said, "Why, yes," crossed to the cabinet, and opened it. He touched a button that made the back shelves of bottles reveal themselves to be clever facsimiles behind which was the steel door of a combination safe.

"I see it's a Lubke-Superwunderbar, a model as famous for its ingenious tumbler design as it is notorious for its thin walls. Well, at least that tells us something," said the detective.

"For God's sake, what?" demanded the Ambassador. "I don't understand."

"Nor do I completely," admitted Ganelon. "But we know the man has gone to the trouble of learning the combination when a small explosive charge in the dead of night might have done just as well."

The Ambassador shook his head. "No, I'm the only one who knows the combination. I have it memorized. It's never been written down."

"He read it over your shoulder."

"Impossible. I never open the safe with someone in the room." When Ganelon pointed out the missing eye in the portrait the Ambassador paled.

"A hole as accurate as that had to be drilled from this side," continued the detective. "Which means our man has access to the safe but chose getting the combination to blowing it open. In other words he wanted to be able to get into the safe without anyone knowing he had. Now tell me, is there anything important or out of the ordinary coming in tonight's diplomatic pouch?"

The Ambassador dabbed at his brow with an immaculate white handkerchief. "Yes," he said.

As a church bell struck the hour of one in the morning, Ganelon, Nicholas Andreyevitch, Sergeant Lucas, and the formidable Captain Stanko were waiting in the dark behind the door in the Ambassador's office. They heard a creaking boot in the hall. The office door opened and a rectangle of light fell across the rug and the desk. The shadow of a man stepped cautiously into this rectangle.

The shadow advanced into the room and stepped out of the light. A mild curse announced a knee had met an unexpected chair. Then a match flared, died, and a softer candle-glow took its place. The men standing against the wall held their breaths as someone carrying a pail with a mop in it crossed to the lacquered cabinet, opened it to the safe, and kneeling down, began to manipulate the combination dial.

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Stanko was on the man in a moment, his great arm around his throat. The Montenegrin hurled the intruder into a corner and moved toward him, his fists huge and eager.

"That's him! That's Father Egon!" cried Nicholas Andreyevitch.

Ganelon ordered the Montenegrin back. Signaling Lucas to give the fake priest a chair, Ganelon poured a stiff araqui. As he handed the glass to the sweating fearful man the detective said, "Who are you and what is this all about?" When the man hesitated Ganelon warned him, "Your fate is in my hands. The Ambassador has agreed to whatever disposition I make of you. I could turn you over to the Russian authorities. Or I could give you to Captain Stanko here."

The man coughed on his drink. "My name is Major Hassan of Turkish Military Intelligence," he said hoarsely. "I have been sent here on a mission of the greatest importance. My orders were to locate the safe in the Montenegrin Embassy, discover its combination, and maintain access to it until further orders. To this end I approached an expert in such matters, an ingenious and as I was later to discover, an imprudent man named Zelinov. We agreed on terms.

"He soon reported that with forged references and under an assumed name he'd gotten a job as a night cleaning man at the Embassy. A week later he reported he had located the safe and intended to discover the combination by drilling a peephole through to the vacant house next door. Two weeks later he informed me he had the combination but insisted on a meeting in the vacant house that evening before he went to work.

"When I arrived he said the job was worth more than we'd settled on. Such demands are not that unusual in our business and I like to think I am a good haggler. But Zelinov suspected the extreme importance of the operation and his demands were extravagant. The argument grew heated. Now I am a short-tempered man when treated arrogantly and sometimes my hand is faster than my brain. Unfortunately, Zelinov's tongue was faster than his. He threatened to go to the Montenegrins.

"I could see he regretted his words before they were out of his mouth but by then my knife was in his chest. I cannot say whether he saw the regret in my eyes before he fell to the floor. On the chance he was carrying the combination on his person I went through his pockets. It was a fruitless search. I stood there with my whole mission dead at my feet and pondered what I was to do. Clearly I would have to find the peephole and rediscover the combination myself. No

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easy task for I didn't even know where the safe was kept. More immediately I needed to establish access to the safe.

"To this end, and so the Montenegrins wouldn't become suspicious when one of their night porters turned up dead next door, I cut off Zelinov's head and took it with me. If anyone cares, I dropped it in the Moika. Then I presented myself dressed for the part to the Montenegrin Embassy claiming to be Zelinov's brother-in-law. I said he'd gone back to his village to be at his mother's deathbed and had asked me to fill in until he returned. They weren't too happy. But I got the job.

"I didn't find the safe or the peephole that first night. But as I was putting away my mop and pail the next day, it occurred to me that where Zelinov would have concealed the hole on this side he wouldn't have had to have been so careful in the vacant house next door. All I had to do was rent the empty house and arrange for the Montenegrins to burn a little midnight oil. Then in the hours of darkness before I came to work I could search the house until I found the light from the peephole.

That morning I cabled Constantinople to get things underway. But I decided it best to wait a few days after the discovery of Zelinov's body before I approached the owner of the house. When I did, I discovered the house already rented. That very afternoon a Bosnian poet was assassinated and ten thousand Bashi Bazouks swept over the border into Serbia.

"Well, my people got me a report on the new tenants: I knew of the Doomed Saints. That would get me my darkness. I cabled Constantinople to keep up the good work. Then I had one of my female operatives meet the religious aunt on the street. Enter Father Egon. I found the peephole the second night. The telegraph lines between the Embassy and Montenegro were humming and the code book was coming out of the safe all the time. Over the next few days I was able to learn the combination.

"I want to see why," said Ganelon, holding out his hand.

Hassan's shoulders sagged. He drew an envelope from inside his red shirt. It bore the Montenegrin seal impressed in the wax on the back flap and diplomatic code numbers on the front.

"We have known for some time," said Hassan, "that the Prince of Montenegro had composed a letter in his own hand and was only awaiting the opportune moment to have it delivered to the Tsar Alexis by the Ambassador here. We were able to obtain the text of the letter, an impassioned appeal to the Tsar as the champion of the

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Slavic race to remember his past commitments to the people of the Balkans. It asks in the most flattering terms for assistance against the Sultan.

"Our version now in the safe is a perfect forgery including the coding on the envelope. Less than two dozen words have been changed or omitted. But now the tone is arrogant and demanding and the terms such that no Russian Autocrat could tolerate. When the Ambassador delivered that forged letter tomorrow morning a wedge would be driven between Russia and the Balkans, and Turkey would be free to crush those petty little countries without having to concern itself with its Eastern flank."

Fong was starting to repeat himself, thought Ganelon. It was the Ems telegram all over again. The detective knew Fong had been the one who had whispered into Bismarck's ear the scheme of editing that journalistic dispatch to provoke the French to war. "Tell me," said Ganelon. "In all your preparations did you every encounter a tall sallow-skinned man with a black mustache?"

"And a shaved head?" asked Hassan. He wet his lips. "When I was called in to be given my final orders there was someone else in the room. He was sitting behind me and I didn't see him clearly. But I'm sure of this: my superior whom I feared above all others was very afraid of this man. Once the man—"

"—laughed?"

"Yes," said Hassan, his voice made unsteady by the remembering.

Ganelon thought for a moment, tapping the envelope against the fingertips of one hand. "Thank you, Major Hassan," he said, honoring his pledge of politeness. "You may go."

Captain Stanko growled when the Turkish officer jumped to his feet. Ganelon waved him back.

"Thank you," said Major Hassan with a nervous smile. "Thank you, sir."

Ganelon shook his head. "No, it might have been kinder of me to give you to our Montenegrin friend here. You sold your soul to a devil incarnate, Major Hassan. And now you've failed in the task he set for you. You will find him a merciless pursuer. An hour from now his dogs will be on your heels. And no matter where you run to, his eyes will already be there. From this day forward I advise you to shun the daylight. Choose the path in the shadows."

Ganelon nodded toward the open doorway. Hassan stepped through it. For a moment his boot creaked in the hall and then he was gone.

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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

How Aaron Durham, a famous Broadway producer, faced and solved a melodramatic problem in a traditional and theatrical way. . . .

SHOW BUSINESS

by GEORGE BAXT

"Dad, maybe there'll be a miracle?"

Aaron Durham looked into his son's eyes. For all the pain, the anxiety and the fear reflected in them, Aaron knew David was trying to let him know he wasn't afraid. He was not yet seventeen years old and he was not afraid.

They sat on a bench in the hospital corridor waiting for the doctor to come out of Rachel's room and give them permission to continue their vigil at her bedside. Lovely Rachel, wife and mother, not yet forty years old, too soon condemned to die.

Aaron uncrossed and recrossed his legs, his eyes now shifted to the door behind which Rachel lay dying, knowing David's eyes were riveted to his face.

"Look at it this way, Dave . . ." He cleared his throat stalling for time. He had been surprised to hear his own voice. He hadn't said much the past couple of weeks to anybody. He spoke only when it was necessary. He couldn't bear the imminent loss of the only woman he had ever loved. "There are on record someplace sworn testimonials to the occurrence of miracles. I for one have never witnessed one, thought I'm perfectly willing to see the curtain rise on one within the next few minutes. I would like Dr. Rosen to come out of your mother's room and tell us our prayers have been answered, that she will recover. That we can take her home next week and a

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few weeks later that I can take her to the south of France where she'll regain all her strength."

He looked at David. "But just in case the scenario doesn't play that way, don't lose the faith. Now why don't you go home? There's no need for you to stay here with me."

"I want to be here with you and Mom." It was a very positive statement. The tone of voice cautioned Aaron not to give his son an argument. Rachel had done an excellent job raising their only child. Aaron took him to ball games but Rachel took him to task. Aaron gave him spending money while Rachel gave him hell. Aaron taught him poker while Rachel taught him pride. Aaron showed him how to be a smart dresser, Rachel showed him how to be a smart person.

The night nurse emerged from Rachel's room, holding the door slightly ajar. "You can come in now," she said in a funereal voice with a Haitian accent. Aaron and David walked past her into the room and she gently closed the door behind them. Dr. Rosen was studying Rachel's chart. Aaron indicated a chair to David who dutifully sat down. Aaron stood at the foot of the bed staring at Rachel, at the tubes protruding from her arms and nose. It was Rachel who was dying but it was his own life that came rumbling before his eyes. The wife was dying but the husband was the drowning man.

Aaron saw himself as a child in his parents' twelve-room apartment on Riverside Drive. They were already wealthy when Aaron was born. Nick Durham was a tough, street-wise ex-prizefighter who had pyramided a small savings account into an empire of sleazy westside bars and beaneries. Bess Durham was a sweet little redhead who treated her five children like aliens from outer space. Only Aaron survived her maternal ineptitude. Aaron was a born organizer and he applied those talents in high school and college where he ran the film and dramatic societies. In college he met Rachel. He directed her as Blanche in "A Streetcar Named Desire." Realizing now he was in love with her, he then gave her the role of Regina in "The Little Foxes." When she finally consented to live with him, he gave her Nora's part in "A Doll's House."

On graduation day they were married. Rachel's parents objected strenuously to the liaison and as Rachel was under legal age, withheld their consent. So Nick Durham sent a couple of his Tenth Avenue buddies over to visit Rachel's father and he then consented to a marriage he was in no shape to attend.

Aaron and Rachel agreed to have no children until he was independent of his father's assistance and gaining a foothold on Broad-

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way as a director and/or producer. They were madly in love. Everyone knew they were madly in love. They never let you forget they were madly in love. They were very boring.

What seemed a brilliant acting talent in college proved to be merely a capability in the Broadway competition. Rachel managed a few small jobs off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway and finally something in a theater located so close to the Hudson River that Aaron would warn friends that to go a few steps farther would result in their hearing a splash.

Aaron earned his apprenticeship with an elderly producer whose fame had begun to tarnish even when Aaron was just a small boy. Yet every so often he came up with a viable script and the necessary financing, and in this way Aaron learned not only the ropes but how to make nooses in them. Aaron met important directors and actors and backers and had the good taste to use these contacts with discretion.

Then Aaron got his hands on a script no other producer would touch. It was an adaptation from the French which Aaron thought was the height of modern sophisticated drama. Rachel thought it was dirty. Aaron spent two years trying to raise the necessary capital until his father, now fighting a losing battle with a rebellious lung, took him to lunch and matter-of-factly asked over coffee, "What have you got against my money?"

"Today Will Be Tomorrow," which was the title of this first play Aaron produced, was a *succes d'estime,* which means the critics liked it but it lost money. Then Aaron found a comedy called "Every Friday." He thought it was slyly witty. Rachel said it was sickeningly salacious. It ran five years and is still banned in Ireland. And now Aaron had money and Rachel became pregnant. When Nick died, half of his estate went to Aaron. Rachel saw to it that the money went into some shrewd investments. Now Aaron had his fingers in so many financial pies that he found it necessary to acquire a partner for his Broadway ventures.

The day after David was born, Marshall Quentin came into Aaron and Rachel's lives. Marshall's background was as varied as his taste. There were some who said he was born in Vienna and brought to America shortly before the Anschluss. One source said he was from Lima, Peru where his father was assassinated during a political upheaval. Still a third had heard he was an illegitmate child of two Hollywood celebrities. This was easily disputed as at the time of

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Marshall's birth, the woman star was well past a child-bearing prime.

Marshall denied nothing and smiled at everything. He had met Aaron's mother Bess at one of those old-lady luncheons where the girls over coffee compared hair dyes. Marshall was newly arrived from Hollywood with a list of credentials Aaron found both imposing and impossible. Aaron took him on as an assistant, and within a year Marshall was a full partner. He had brought in the prize-winning script, "Who Stole September?", and that started the meteoric rise of Durham-Quentin Productions.

Rachel didn't despise Marshall. She merely disliked and distrusted him and on many occasions told him so to his face. Now completely retired as an actress and devoted to being a wife and mother, Rachel developed another talent. She fostered an acid tongue. She could wither an adversary at twenty paces without splitting an infinitive. She was quoted and misquoted from coast to coast and continent to continent and was soon a legend in her own time. She became the central clearinghouse for all gossip and innuendo. She knew exactly how much was stolen from whom. She could quote almost to the exact decimal point how much was being skimmed at which Las Vegas Hotel, which upstate dinner theater, and which Broadway production. She knew her own husband was being robbed, but could never prove it. Aaron was making too many profits from his other investments to really care. Actually, Durham-Quentin Productions was mostly being run by Marshall Quentin . . .

"Aaron." It was Dr. Rosen who spoke.

"What? What is it?"

"Rachel's awake. She wants to say something to you. She's very weak. You'll have to bend your ear close to her mouth."

Aaron kissed Rachel lightly on the forehead and then, trying not to become entangled with the tubes, lowered his head until his left ear was next to her mouth.

"Darling," she whispered weakly, "I love you very much." David could see his father's shoulders begin to quake as he was choking back his tears. "Look after David. Watch that crook Marshall. Defrost the refrigerator." And she was dead.

The next night the Broadway lights were dimmed for one minute in tribute to Rachel Durham. Tourists in the street who never heard of Rachel Durham thought it was another of one of those New York brownouts. Members of the theater fraternity lowered their heads while trading wisecracks, and a small army of muggers and purse

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snatchers had a field day. Rachel's funeral services were private as she had requested, but two weeks later on a Wednesday at noon there was a memorial service at the Morosco Theatre on West Forty-Fifth Street (for which there would soon be a memorial service as the theater was being threatened with demolition.)

A dozen Broadway and Hollywood notables sat in a semicircle on stage paying tribute to the late wife, mother, and acid wit. Marshall Quentin sat in the first row with an incredibly beautiful woman. David Durham, who sat behind them with his father, can still describe the heady but subtle scent that emanated from this unique creature. Aaron couldn't take his eyes off her profile.

An hour later, when the tribute was ended, Marshall introduced Ina Fontaine to Aaron Durham. They shook hands, at first tentatively, but then Ina clasped Aaron's hand tightly and said in a voice that David thought was liquid platinum, "How nice it is to meet you, and how sorry I am that it is under these tragic circumstances." David wondered why he thought it sounded rehearsed. He was to wonder for several years to come why he thought everything she said was rehearsed.

Let us dwell briefly on Ina Fontaine whom David recognized as one of the featured players of a short-lived detective series on television the previous year. She looked less brassy and obvious off screen—in fact, he thought the camera hadn't done her justice at all. He thought she was in her mid-twenties. (She was in her early thirties.) He thought he detected a romantic trace of a continental accent in her speech. (She was born in Cleveland thirty-two years ago and her name was Ida Fangetti.) A brief stint of modeling in San Francisco won her a television producer and some small roles in situation comedies. Mort Conn, a top independant Hollywood agent, took her under his wing and promoted the television series the previous year. Marshall had met her at about that time when in Hollywood to negotiate the sale of the film rights to his and David's hit thriller of the previous season, "In Stitches." David of course was immediately smitten with Ina and didn't recognize similar symptoms in Aaron's face.

The four dined together that night at Sardi's and Ina was Marie Antoinette holding court. Marshall Quentin recognized that both Durhams were captivated with the actress and felt very pleased with himself. He knew David would soon be out of the running because he'd be returning to college. And there was a small but

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showy part in the upcoming melodrama, "Shadows and Shadings," that would be suitable for Ina.

David, reluctantly, went back to college. Ina was given the role in the play and garnered respectable notices. Aaron fell hopelessly in love with Ina, and his lawyers pleaded with him to hire an investigator to trace the disappearance of large sums of money from the box office of the theater housing "Shadows and Shadings." Aaron dutifully hired an investigator and the money stopped disappearing from the box office. Marshall went to London to scout the new shows.

David was graduated with honors and told Aaron he wanted to be a producer.

"You mean on Broadway?"

"For starters."

"But you don't know anything about producing."

"Neither did you when you began."

So David went to work for Durham-Quentin Productions as a glorified "gofer." He'd "gofer" the coffee and sandwiches and cigarettes while haunting the theater housing "Shadows and Shadings," hopelessly in love with Ina Fontaine.

Ina knew she had captured both father and son. But the son could wait in the wings while she sewed up the father. Marshall returned from London minus any acquisitions, having lost out to a team of women producers who specialized in raiding Shaftesbury Avenue and transporting their trophies to New York with as much of the original company as Actors' Equity would permit to enter and work in the country. Marshall met Ina for a drink in a secluded bar on First Avenue under the Queensboro Bridge. His fingers were beating a tattoo on the table. "What's going wrong?"

Ina shrugged. "Nothing's going wrong. He just doesn't ask me to marry him."

"I thought you knew every trick in the trade."

"I've pulled them all except the pregnant bit. He knows I'm too smart to get pregnant. And anyway I don't want to get pregnant. Maybe I should marry the son."

"Has David made a pass at you?" Marshall was amused at the thought of David and Aaron vying for Ina's favors.

"I don't think he knows how. I think he's being faithful to his mother's memory. And I think that's also Aaron's problem."

"They both worshipped Rachel. I loathed her. From the moment we met she saw right through me. All Aaron was interested in was whether or not I could deliver and I sure delivered, but pretty soon

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it's all going to catch up with me and I don't relish my head on the chopping block."

On the other side of town Aaron was having an early dinner with David. His son seemed preoccupied and without appetite.

"What's wrong, David?"

"I don't know." He sighed. "I just don't think I'm getting anyplace."

"You can't become a producer overnight."

"I know that. It's just—well, I take an awful lot of kidding."

"About what?"

David took a deep breath and then the plunge. "You and Ina."

Aaron smiled. "What about me and Ina?"

"Well, it's pretty obvious you two have something going."

"We're of age."

"Don't be sardonic. Are you going to marry her?"

Aaron lit a cigarette. He smoked perhaps four a day, and only when he needed a prop. "I think about it. Then I dismiss it. Then I think about it again. Then I think about your mother."

"She's dead. And you're still a young man. Let me tell you this, Dad, if you don't marry Ina I'm going to go after her myself. She's a knockout!"

To everyone's relief except old Bess Durham, Aaron married Ina two months later in a quiet ceremony in his Park Avenue apartment. David nursed what he assumed to be his broken heart for about a month and then met a dancer from one of the road companies of "Seven Brides for Seven Brides" (the witty musical version of "The Well Of Loneliness") and promptly shared her residence on Cloud Nine.

Dad, maybe there'll be a miracle . . .

To David, Bibi Jennings had been the miracle. The lovely little dancer adored him, and he returned her love with passion. Things seemed to be going just great for both father and son.

Aaron's lawyer, Wendell Vernon, phoned one morning to ask for a very special meeting. Aaron dutifully arrived at Wendell's office at the appointed hour and sat silently and stoically as Wendell told him a horror story.

"Your wife and your partner are attempting to swindle you out of your fortune."

The sordid details of Marshall Quentin's scheme to ruin Aaron Durham are too intricate to set out in detail here. Suffice to say that when Wendell Vernon finished his discourse some thirty minutes later, Aaron Durham fought hard to keep from throwing up on his

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lawyer's incredibly expensive rug. A box-office man (the theater in which he is still employed must remain nameless) had squealed on Marshall Quentin to Aaron's lawyer mostly because Marshall wasn't being generous with a share of the skimming he was taking for himself.

Aaron asked his lawyer, "Are my wife and my partner lovers?"

"They have been ever since they first met."

"I see. Not only swindled, but cuckolded. If this gets out I'll be a laughing-stock." The lawyer said nothing. "Poor Rachel, wherever she is, must be screaming her head off. This will kill my mother. And my son. Poor David. He'll have no respect for me." Aaron went to the window and stared out at Fifth Avenue. Then he turned and faced his lawyer. "I need time to think."

"Don't take too much time."

"I've got assets no one can touch."

"But the ones they're touching are depleting rapidly."

Aaron left the office, walked to Central Park, bought a hot dog and a soft drink, and sat on a bench deep in thought. Then he walked through the zoo and back out to Fifth Avenue, hailed a cab, and fifteen minutes later rang his doctor's doorbell.

Dr. Isaiah Kerby owed the existence of his practice to Aaron Durham. He had been one of the interns who had been so kind and devoted to Rachel at the hospital. He was still struggling but slowly gaining a well deserved recognition, and his practice was growing slowly, but growing. Isaiah's nurse was his wife, Betsy. She greeted Aaron warmly and took him straight into Isaiah's surgery. There she left the two men alone at Aaron's request.

"You look good, Aaron. So what's wrong?"

"Isaiah," he said, "I never dreamed I'd do this to any man, but I'm desperate. You owe me. I've come for payment."

The doctor paled and waited while Aaron lit a cigarette . . .

Several weeks later one of the city's two tabloids carried an item in a gossip column that a certain noted Broadway producer had "gotten the bad news from his doctor." It named no one. It was what is known in the trade as a "blind item." But people began to notice that Aaron was losing weight. He had little appetite. He slept badly. Ina and Marshall were elated. "It's got to be!" exclaimed Marshall happily. "They've got to be right. He's got the Big One!" David was anguished. Aaron consoled him, "Maybe there'll be a miracle?"

Marshall and Ina were so busy awaiting Aaron's "funeral" and as a result speculating on the size of her expected inheritance, they

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were unaware of the team of detectives trailing them around the clock. As for Aaron, he planned his "future" methodically. He knew exactly what had to be done. He hoped Rachel would forgive him and be proud of him. The worlds of the theater and finance only expressed sympathy for Aaron's condition. Under Oath, Dr. Isaiah Kerby was prepared to swear his client was terminally ill.

Through one of his father's loyal Tenth Avenue contacts Aaron bought a gun. On a certain Sunday afternoon Ina kissed his forehead, said she was off to meet "the girls" for lunch, and told Aaron to be a good boy. After she left, Aaron patiently read the theater section of *The New York Times* until the phone rang and the detective told Aaron that Ina was in Marshall's apartment in Greenwich Village.

Thirty minutes later, using the skeleton key one of the detectives assured him would gain immediate access into Marshall's apartment, Aaron entered the apartment, drew the gun from his coat pocket, released the safety, crossed quietly to Marshall's bedroom, opened the door, saw his partner and his wife in *flagrante delicto,* and pumped six bullets into the two of them. They died instantly.

Aaron crossed back to the living room and in rapid succession he phoned his lawyer, his doctor, his son, and the police.

Of course the murders were headlines. You must remember them. It was only two years ago, and everyone (that is, everyone except Ina's family in Cleveland) were overjoyed at Aaron's acquittal. Wendell Vernon was never more impassioned or brilliant than in his summing up before the jury, impressing on them that these were crimes of passion, the crimes of a "dying" man who was being both swindled and cuckolded by his wife and partner. Aaron managed a sly wink at a very nervous Dr. Isaiah Kerby who was never called upon to testify, mostly because Aaron had instructed his lawyer to do everything possible to avoid having him testify.

The night of his acquittal Aaron enjoyed a quiet dinner with David and Bibi in their apartment on West Eightieth Street. They had set the date for their wedding which pleased Aaron immensely as Bibi was now in her fifth month and Aaron was still old-fashioned enough to want a legitimate grandchild. Although Bibi prepared one of her superb New England boiled dinners (she came from Maine), Aaron could only pick at his food.

"Well, Dad," said David as he refilled the glasses with wine, "I guess there are miracles. I mean, well, for a minute there I thought—well . . ."

Aaron patted his hand. "I'm acquitted. I'm here. I'm sorry your

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child will have to suffer a murderer for a grandfather, but I'm leaving him or her a lot of money, so that should help things."

"Dad, how do you really feel? Are you in pain?"

"No. I'm not in pain at all. In fact, I've made up my mind to take a trip to Europe."

"Alone?"

"Sure alone. I'm old enough."

"I mean—in your condition . . ."

A small smile flitted across Aaron's gaunt face. He didn't realize how tragically his clothes hung on him. "I'll be fine. And I'm giving you your big opportunity. The Durham name must continue to live on Broadway!"

"Hear hear!" chirruped Bibi.

"Exactly," agreed Aaron. He said to David, "You're the boss now. We have two good scripts for next season. Get cracking on them. When I get back in a month or two, I want our office to be a steambath of activity!" Father and son embraced and Bibi wiped a tear from her eye.

David won the immediate respect of his peers in the theater while his father traveled through Europe. Aaron's postcards were witty but uninformative. Nine weeks after his departure, he suddenly returned. When he entered the offices of Durham Productions, a hush fell over the anteroom. The switchboard operator, the three secretaries, the office boy, and the people who had appointments could not believe what they were seeing.

The sudden silence brought an inquisitive David from his office. His chin dropped. "Oh, my God! It's you! It's really you!" Then he shouted, "Bibi! Bibi!" Bibi came waddling out of David's office. She had come there to take him to lunch. Bibi took one look at Aaron and burst into tears.

Aaron had gained back thirty pounds. His cheeks were healthy and ruddy, his skin was bronzed, and his eyes sparkled. His clothes fit immaculately and he looked ten years younger. David threw his arms around Aaron and unashamedly kissed his cheek. He led him to his office and when he, Aaron, and Bibi were alone, he asked, "What happened? What is this miracle that happened? Look at you—you're your old healthy self!"

Aaron sat and crossed one leg over the other. "I'll tell you about this miracle. There I was, traveling about, lonesome, unhappy, losing weight, when I thought of you David, and that night we sat on the hospital bench while your mother was dying. Your heart was

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breaking and you asked me, 'Dad, maybe there'll be a miracle?' Well, David, I thought of you and said, 'David deserves a miracle.' Now where could I possibly find a miracle for David? And then I remembered.

"So, children, I went to Switzerland. I checked into a clinic that I once read about in a medical journal. There was a doctor with whom I was able to discuss my recent unpleasantness and my loss of weight, which I am now free to admit was self-induced."

David and Bibi exchanged uneasy glances.

"After explaining my diet to this doctor, he threw up his hands with delight and said, 'you have created a miracle!' And so the world will soon be introduced to the Durham Miracle Diet."

Daivd asked in a small voice, "You weren't seriously ill?"

"Did I ever say I was seriously ill?" David found Bibi's hand and helt it tightly. "It was my lawyer who claimed I was a dying man. I never said I was a dying man. My doctor never said I was a dying man. He told me I was dangerously anemic and suffering from malnutrition, but good meals and vitamins could correct that. Do you think the jury acquitted me out of sympathy for my 'condition'? I think not."

David leaned back with his arms folded. "I have to admit, Dad, you kept your promise. You gave me a miracle. And I'm very grateful. But do me a big favor. No more miracles." He added in almost a whisper, "One is about all I can take."

DETECTIVERSE

SAFE IN HEAVEN

by C. SAND CHILDS

Safe in heaven, Sherlock Holmes,
Reading Queen, waxed sentimental:
"Well, Watson, the solution
Seems strictly Ellerymental."

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a *NEW* detective story by

PATRICIA McGERR

Selena Pierce (née Mead) is the wife of Hugh Pierce, head of the top-secret intelligence branch known as Section Q. Wouldn't it be marvelous if all our intelligence and law-enforcement agencies had a Selena standing by, shrewdly putting together the jigsaw pieces?

THE BLOODY MUSTACHE

by PATRICIA McGERR

Espionage is generally regarded as a high-risk occupation. Spies go disguised into enemy territory, search for secrets in dark corners and among dangerous men. The casualty rate is high, the protection minimal. But Hugh Pierce, as head of the top-secret intelligence branch known as Section Q, was an administrator, a planner, a desk man. While other agents roamed the world, he stayed in Washington to analyze and coordinate the information they gathered. And bureaucrats, he assured his wife, are nobody's target.

Most of the time she believed him. Only occasionally did a middle-of-the-night summons or a sudden trip abroad bring her dormant fears to the surface. And in each case his safe return proved those fears groundless.

Yet when Selena came home from church that Sunday to hear the phone ringing in an empty house, she anticipated bad news even before the caller identified herself as a nurse at Sibley hospital.

"It's my husband, isn't it? What happened? Is he—"

"He'll be fine." The voice was professionally soothing. "There's no cause to worry, but—"

"I'll come at once. Tell him I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

If he's conscious, she thought as she hurried to her car. If he can

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hear the message. Oh, dear God, what did they do to him? Hugh had left home soon after daybreak, taking his pad and pencils to make sketches along the towpath of the C & O canal. At least, she amended, that's what he had told me. I had no idea he was on a job for Section Q, no suspicion that he was walking into danger. Please let him not be badly hurt. Let him be alive. Through the short drive to the hospital, her mind swung on a pendulum between prayer and foreboding.

So it was anticlimax to walk through the emergency entrance and see him sitting near the door, his arm encased in plaster and supported by a sling.

"You—" She looked from his face to the cast and back again. "You broke your arm. Is that all?"

"You expected more?" He grinned at her. "Sorry to disappoint you, but how much damage can one bicycle do?"

"You were hit by a bicycle?"

"Yes. Didn't the nurse explain?"

"I didn't wait for an explanation. I just rushed right over." Suddenly limp, she dropped into the chair beside him. "When she said you were in the hospital, I thought—I was sure—"

"I know, darling." He grasped her hand in his free one. "I know. I should have phoned you myself, but they were patching me up and I didn't realize the effect a call from a hospital might have on you."

"I shouldn't be so skittish." She forced a smile. "So you were hit by a bicyclist."

"Bowled over by a demon twelve-year-old. Fortunately it's a clean break and should heal in a couple of weeks."

"Then you can come home with me?"

"As soon as you sign the forms."

At home she prepared a simple lunch that could be managed with one hand and they ate in the sun-filled back garden.

"Now," she told him, "you're going to take the pills the doctor gave you and lie down. You need rest."

"I do feel a little shaky," he admitted. "You'll have to go to the art show without me."

"Art show?" She frowned, then remembered. "Oh, the one at the Montini Gallery. I'm not interested in that. You're the artist in the family. I was only going to keep you company. And I'm certainly not going to leave you at home alone."

"I'm afraid you must. There's a picture I want you to buy."

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"A picture? But why—oh!" She looked at him accusingly. "You *are* on a job. This morning you were attacked. The talk about a bicycle was just—"

"Selena, no! What happened this morning was an accident. I swear it." He raised the fingers that extended from his cast. "It had nothing to do with Section Q."

"But this art exhibit does."

"Indirectly, yes," he agreed. "Some time ago we discovered that the gallery was being used as a conduit for defense secrets. Maps, diagrams, and blueprints are put on canvas, then painted over with a landscape or still life that can be peeled off when the picture reaches its foreign destination. If we can identify the person who arranges the shipments, we should be able, through him, to trace the rest of the network."

"And my buying a picture today is going to accomplish that?"

"It's the final step. One of our agents, a young man who is studying art history, was able to get into Montini's as an apprentice. For a small salary and a room at the back of the building, he helps with hanging, framing, and other odd jobs. Since he can't risk direct communication, the plan is for him to put what he's learned about the operation on a piece of paper and insert it under the frame of one of the pictures on display today. That's the one you're going to buy."

"How will I recognize it?"

"It will be number 17 in the catalogue."

"Because Q is the 17th letter?"

"Exactly. That makes it easy to remember."

"It sounds like a simple errand. Why not send someone else and let me stay with you?"

"Because I'm on the gallery's regular invitation list. You know who comes to these exhibit openings. It's a closed circle—the artist's friends and rivals, critics and dealers, and a few genuine art lovers. A stranger would attract attention, especially one who made a purchase. We don't want to alarm our bird until he—or she—is in the net."

"She? Is there a woman among the suspects?"

"The possibles include two women and two men," he answered. "First there's the gallery owner, Roberto Montini."

"I've met him. A very distinguished old man. Surely he's not a spy."

"They come in all ages," he reminded her. "And art can be an

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expensive habit. But the other three are equally likely. The gallery manager is a very efficient woman named Dolly Wilson. Her assistant, who joined the staff about two years ago, is Carl Adamson. And the appraiser-accountant is also female—Louisa Crane. If our agent has been successful, one of those names will be on the paper behind picture number 17. Let's hope it's one of the smaller, less expensive works."

People attend art openings to eat, drink, and gossip. Few pay serious attention to the exhibits, even fewer buy. But to guard against that rare buyer being attracted to number 17, Selena entered the Montini Gallery at a few minutes after five. She was one of the first arrivals.

Near the punchbowl a well-dressed couple were talking to a cadaverous-looking man whose nervousness marked him as the artist whose works were on display. Another man came forward to greet her. She gave her name and he introduced himself as Carl Adamson. He was tall and fair with a hairline mustache. His clothes, she noticed, were well tailored and expensive. Either he was better paid than most gallery assistants or he had another source of income.

When he turned to greet two more guests, she opened the catalogue, skipping the biographical notes to scan the list of paintings. Number 17 was titled "Stag at Eve - 1972" and priced at $225. That shouldn't strain the Section Q budget.

Starting with the first painting she moved slowly around the room, with frequent pauses to study a picture with the air of a serious connoisseur and potential buyer. She had reached number 11 when the owner joined her.

"Mrs. Pierce." He took her hand, brushed it with his lips. "What a pleasure to see you. And your husband? Is he not here?"

"Hugh had an accident this morning. He's at home with a broken arm."

"Ah, that is ill fortune. But you will tell him that I have discovered a fine new artist. You admire his work?"

"Yes, signor, it's very impressive." She continued to move with him at her side. "In fact, I may buy one as a gift for my brother's birthday."

"It will be a fine investment." Under shaggy white brows bright blue eyes sparkled. "This man is a comer. In five years, maybe less, his prices will double."

Number 16, "Street Scene - 1979," was in front of her. Her eyes

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slid to the next. It was numbered 18. She looked at the catalogue, saw that it fitted the title "Beach Ball - 1971." Where was "Stag at Eve"?

"There seems to be one missing," she said. "They go from 16 to 18. No number 17."

"Hmm." He looked at her catalogue. "Strange." Turning around, he spoke in a piercing whisper. "Dolly, come here. I want you."

On the other side of the room a woman detached herself from a group and hurried toward them. She was middle-aged but handsome. Dark hair was braided and wound around her head in a double crown.

"Mrs. Wilson, my right hand." Montini presented her to Selena. "Dolly, why is number 17 not here?"

"Isn't it?" With a glance she answered her own question. "Perhaps the artist withdrew it after the catalogue went to press. Or it may be some place else, out of order. Is it important?"

"No, not at all." He spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. "Only sometimes I like to know what goes on in my own gallery."

"You always do, signor." With a smiling nod to Selena, the manager left them.

"Continue to look until you find what you want, dear lady," Montini said. "I must speak to my other guests."

She began to move at a faster pace, looking at numbers not pictures. There was no other break in the sequence. Was it merely coincidence that 17 was the only work not in place? And where was the Q-man? She looked around the room which was now well filled.

A plump woman with lavender hair and spectacles on a chain was seated in the far corner. On a table in front of her were pens and receipt forms and a card of small red stars ready to mark the chosen paintings as "Sold." That presumably was the appraiser-accountant Louisa Crane.

So all the staff were present except the young apprentice. Since he lived on the premises, he could be expected to attend the reception. But with both him and the painting missing, Selena was left with nothing to do but go home to Hugh and wait for the young man to report his findings by some other means.

"You have chosen something for your brother?" Montini was again beside her.

"There are several that I like," she answered politely. "But I think—"

A shrill scream cut her short and the screamer, a young woman

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in a red jumpsuit, came running down the hall that led to the rooms behind the gallery.

"There's a man—there's blood—" Her words, in broken phrases, came slowly as she fought for breath, her eyes wide with shock. "I was looking—ladies' room—went back and found—oh, God, I think he's dead."

Montini, with Selena close behind him, rushed past her to the open door at the end of the passage. It was, she saw, a workroom containing a variety of canvases, some on easels, others leaning against the wall, waiting to be framed or packed. An oblong table filled the center of the room. Several feet beyond it—three canvases away from the table—was the body of a man.

He was dressed in jeans and T-shirt. His dark hair was medium length. The apprentice, Selena thought. Q's representative. Confirmation, if needed, lay in the unframed painting on the table. An antlered deer beside a forest stream. Stag at Eve. The young man, it appeared, had been surprised by his assailant while secreting his report behind number 17. Beside the table a stool was overturned. Near it lay a dark-stained knife, and a trail of dried blood led to the body.

"He is dead." Montini, who had dropped to the floor beside the victim, looked back at the doorway. The hall behind Selena was now thronged with people. "Stay out, everyone. Carl, keep them back. And you, Dolly, tell Louisa to summon the police. It will be better if no one leaves until they arrive."

Carl Adamson, as instructed, herded the crowd back to the main room and Montini came out, pulling the door shut behind him. Before it closed, Selena's eyes took in one more detail. The painting nearest the body—the third one away from the table—was a portrait of a girl reading a book. Drawn in blood on her upper lip was a finger-wide mustache.

It was not hard to enforce Montini's request that all the guests await the arrival of the police. A murder was a better show than the one they had come to see, and no one wanted to miss the second act. As soon as the appraiser-accountant had notified the police, Selena phoned Hugh. Her words, being overheard, were guarded.

"I'll be delayed," she told him. "Someone has been killed. A young man who works here."

"Ours?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so. And I won't be able to buy a picture."

"I understand. Come home as soon as you can."

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In less than a quarter of an hour the gallery was under police control. The doctor confirmed that the young man had been dead for several hours, and pending an autopsy, diagnosed a knife wound in the chest as probable cause. While the detective in charge questioned Montini, two policemen in uniform checked identities of the guests. Except for the gallery staff and the young woman who found the body, they were all free to leave after giving their names, addresses, and phone numbers to the men at the door.

Selena held back until another man arrived, and after a brief exchange with a policeman went back to the workroom. He could be taken for one more member of the homicide team, but Selena noticed that his attire had one nonconservative note. A blue necktie was speckled with what appeared at first glance to be small red doughnuts. Her sharper look recognized them to be the letter Q. So the agency was represented and there was no need for her to linger. She got in line, gave the required information to the police, and went home.

Hugh was not alone. With him in the soundproofed downstairs office was a colleague he introduced as Quade. She quickly filled them both in on what she had seen and heard at the art show.

"Then we have to assume that the person who killed our agent also destroyed his report," Hugh said somberly when she finished. "So we've lost a good man and are no closer to an answer than when we planted him there."

"We're farther away," Quade added. "The other side now knows that the gallery is under surveillance. So they'll stop using it as a channel and we'll have to start all over to find the next link in the chain."

"Unless we can spot the killer in a hurry," Hugh agreed. "The local police have been told that there's national-security interest in the crime and they'll take the four staff members to headquarters for questioning. But they can't hold them long. And we can be sure that the minute our quarry is loose, he'll get out of the country and beyond our reach."

"The victim used his last strength and his own blood," Selena pointed out, "to draw a mustache on that picture. He must have been trying to tell us who killed him."

"Does Montini have a mustache?" Quade asked.

"No," she answered, "but Carl Adamson does."

"Too obvious," Hugh objected. "It would have been easier to write

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the name than to draw a mustache, but he knew the killer would destroy anything that pointed directly to him. He had to leave a clue his murderer wouldn't understand."

"It's not much help if we don't understand it either," Quade said, then brightened. "Wait, though. 'mustache' is underworld slang for an elderly Italian. It looks like he was fingering Montini."

"I don't think so." Selena half shut her eyes, visualizing the workroom. "He had a hard job to get to that particular painting. There were two others nearer the place where he fell. One was a pair of swans, the other a still life of fruit. He dragged himself past both of them in order to reach the girl."

"So he was pointing to a woman," Quade concluded. "But which one? The manager or the accountant? Hey, maybe that's it. You said the girl was reading. So she was holding a book. And an accountant is a bookkeeper. Do you think—"

"I doubt it." Hugh shook his head. "A simple X on the book would have given us that lead. The boy was dying. He wasn't playing an elaborate game of charades. The mustache on the girl's lip has to say something that he couldn't get through to us in any other way."

"He was an art student working in an art gallery," Selena reminded them. "That's the background from which his ideas would come. And there's one artist whose mustache is almost as well known as his paintings."

"Salvador Dali," Hugh said.

"That's right," Quade seconded. "He not only has a distinctive-looking mustache himself but he drew one on a picture of the Mona Lisa. But what has Salvador Dali to do with—oh, I see. Dali. Dolly."

"She's our woman." Hugh was already reaching for the phone. "The gallery manager. Dolly Wilson."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

"Self-respect is more than pride, and to some of us it's as needful as the air we breathe." Archie Gee, who used to do a turn on the old music-hall circuit, had pride and self-respect. So, before the final curtain fell on his life, he had one more act to perform—an act of vengeance . . .

THE WAY TO HUNT TIGERS

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Effie never liked my way of making a living after I got out of the army. "No better than stealing," she would nag. "Beats me why people pay good money to watch it."

Well, they didn't pay just to see me, of course. Mine was just one turn in a variety show—when the phrase meant something more than singers and comics followed by comics and singers.

"It's only entertainment," I always soothed her, but poor Effie wouldn't have it. And she wouldn't come with me on the road. Told the neighbors I was a traveling salesman, bless her heart. She was a funny one, brought up strict by chapel folk; but a wonderful wife, and she'd have been a wonderful mother, too, if she'd survived having Doris.

But she didn't, and I was mother and father to that child. It meant the end of my showbiz career, I *could* say, but it would be a lie. Doris was born in 1954, when television was knocking the guts out of the old music-hall circuit. By the time Doris came along, I was down to being MC and light relief in a strip show, and I'd already decided to give it all up before it gave me up.

I'd always saved, or rather Effie had, so there was a bit of capital to start a little shop. For the first six years I paid a housekeeper,

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and then it was just young Doris and me. She was a smashing kid who grew into a smashing woman—all Effie's prettiness plus a natural sweetness that would have made poor Effie blink.

Obviously we were closer than some fathers and daughters, Doris and me. But there was never any jealousy nonsense when she met Geoff and wanted to marry him after they'd been courting for six months. He was a decent enough lad, no great brain, but a worker with his head screwed on straight.

They found a house a mile away from my place, came round for supper twice a week, and a game of cards or a chinwag in front of the telly. I generally had Sunday dinner at their home. Very dull, you'll be thinking, and I can't say you're wrong. But there's plenty of people who will tell you that treasures don't always glitter and sparkle.

I got on well with Geoff. His folks had died when he was a nipper, and apart from a night out with the lads every week, he appreciated being a family man. I looked forward to being a grandfather.

So what the hell was I doing in the Pig and Partridge two years after the wedding day, with a heart like a dead cinder?

It all happened while I was recuperating. After my funny turn, when I blacked out, the doctor told me it would happen again, and last longer, and again. . . It was a facer. We all die, and in any case, he said that with care, a touch of common sense, I could last ten more years. But lying to Doris and Geoff took it out of me, and when the Veterans' Home up on the Yorkshire coast offered me a month's accommodation for a ridiculously small fee, I grabbed the excuse and fled. I'd already sold the shop, so there was nothing to keep me.

When I got back, Doris was—well, strange. I'd written every week and rung once or twice, but I thought maybe she was miffed with me. Quite stiff, not at all like her, and no invitation to stay for food, when I called on the way home from the station.

A few days later I phoned, suggesting they come to me. "Well, Dad, it's not very convenient just now. Geoff's rushed off his feet and I've got a rotten cold. Leave it a while, eh?" She'd sounded fine to me.

I nearly went and had it out with them, but I evaded it. My excuse was that time cures everything. But we were just about out of time. Next thing, the police were ringing my doorbell. Geoff had gone off a motorway flyover in his car, and he and Doris were dead.

They were very kind, the young constable and a woman, but it

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wasn't just a condolence visit and gentle breaking of the news. They needed me to identify the bodies. Doris and Geoff looked pretty peaceful, it wasn't as horrifying as I feared. But all the same, staring at them and thinking of all those dreams and hopes, two futures chopped short. . . It baffled and angered me, deeply.

The inquest was another shock, worse in a way. I'd assumed it was a senseless accident, a tire blowout or something similar. After two witnesses had given evidence, I understood the drift. Not that it was hard to work out. Geoff had been drunk—half a bottle of whiskey and several beers inside him.

Doris followed him to the pub when she got sick of waiting for him to return, and insisted on driving him home because he was obviously unfit to be at the wheel. The final witness, a lorry driver, described following the car and seeing Doris and Geoff arguing, just before he grabbed at the wheel and the skid began. . .

I'd never seen Geoff the worse for drink, even at his stag night before the wedding. Doris hadn't been standoffish with me, she just didn't want me to learn what was going on.

The coroner said a lot about the lunacy of drinking and driving, before recording a verdict of accidental death. To my mind, he hadn't asked the only really constructive question. What the hell had turned a quiet, sensible lad like Geoff into a wild drinker?

I've lived in this town some 30 years and was born only a few miles away, I know the locals through and through. Ask a direct question, and they'll change the subject or give the answer they expect you to want. Patience is needed, a bit of low cunning. I had nothing better to do, and wouldn't have done anything else, in any case. It took me three months.

The break came through a boy called Niven Collins, a friend of Geoff's. He told me about the run-in Geoff had with Barry Streets, while I was in hospital, before I went away to rest. I'd heard of Streets—you'd need to be deaf not to have, in our town. He'd been the star of the soccer team before giving the game up and opening a car dealership.

"We were in that pub by the football ground, the Pig and Partridge," said Niven. "Barry Streets and Geoff had a few words, like. Streets heard Geoff slagging the team he used to be with."

"A few words?"

Niven Collins worked in a bank; he was a bit prim and prissy, so already the story was making him uneasy. "Well, there was a sort

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of fight. In the car park. Geoff never had a chance—Streets is a hulking great fellow and he had two or three mates with him, bigger if anything."

"So they beat up Geoff?"

Niven's lower lip pushed out, and he stared at the floor. "No. It was only horseplay. Really. You couldn't blame Geoff, he had to knuckle under."

"What happened, then, Niven?"

He sighed gustily, twisting his hands. "I wouldn't want you to ever repeat this. It killed Geoff, he avoided me afterwards, just because I was there at the time. They pushed him around at first, one to the other, then—um—they pulled his trousers off and threw them over the fence by the railway. It's a tall fence, with barbed wire. Geoff couldn't climb over, half naked as he was. Poor guy."

"And then?"

He shrugged and twisted his hands some more. "Well, they stood round, sort of jeering at Geoff, then they walked off. His car keys were in the trousers, so he was locked out. I had to pop home and fetch my car to run him home, while he hid in the pub restroom. It was terribly embarrassing. You couldn't blame Geoff, letting them get away with it. Least said, soonest mended."

I think he believed it. "Would you have let them do it, Niven?"

He grinned unhappily. "Maybe not. I think I'd have fought enough to make 'em knock me out or something. But then, I never weighed in to help Geoff. There's times when you've got to swallow your pride, Mr. Gee."

Possibly. But self-respect is more than pride, and to some of us it's as needful as the air we breathe. I was certain Geoff had been that way. A gang of louts had rubbed his nose in the fact that he was a coward, and not very long afterward it destroyed him. Along with my daughter.

Niven said, "I'm sorry I told you, Mr. Gee. Don't know what came over me." I'd come over him, not to mention three big rum-and-peppermints. "I wouldn't want you to remember Geoff for that, Mr. Gee. We'd been friends since school. He was a lovely bloke. Don't remember that, nor him going all mad-headed and—well, the crash and everything. There was a lot more to him than that. He was kind, and a great joker, and I happen to know, a very good husband. Until near the end, that is."

I nodded and changed the subject. Niven couldn't see the connec-

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tion between Geoff's humiliation that night and what came after it. I could; it not only made sense, I *knew*.

The interesting part, I told myself, while Niven chattered on tipsily, was what a dying old man could do about it.

I could get to know Barry Streets, for a start—discreetly, from a distance, the way you hunt tigers. A privilege of age is that to the young you're too boring to register. He never saw me, though he must have looked at me often enough.

Remembering Niven's tale, I took to drinking at the Pig and Partridge, and sure enough, Streets rolled in. A beefy chap, about 30, looking older because his tight ginger curls were thinning and crawling back from the shiny pink forehead. Brutal shoulders, fat hands, a loud laugh that never reached his eyes. He liked to arm-wrestle and he liked to travel in a pack.

A couple of weeks gave me all the confirmation I needed. One night, in a Chinese restaurant, he nearly broke one of the toylike waiter's arms, twisting it up behind his back. Streets had made the boy trip and spill rice on the floor. Then he forced him to eat some of it off the carpet.

This time Streets did see me, watching from the corner. He threw a ten-pound note on the floor as the manager and three kitchen hands came out, one carrying a cleaver. "That'll pay for it," Streets said.

You haven't got enough money to pay my bill, Mister, I thought.

Which was all very well, but didn't get me anywhere as the weeks became months.

Sitting at home, I could hear Effie scolding me. "You, take revenge on that hulking great brute, Archie? Why, you're no taller than ten penn'orth of small change piled up! A breeze could blow you over. Fancy yourself as a he-man, then?" I do a lot of talking to Effie in my head. Not that I'm cracked. It's more a matter of listening, and having a good memory.

All right, I argued back at her, *I'll get a gun. I was in the army.* Knowing it for pure childishness. My war wasn't a killer's one. I spent it in offices and fired a rifle once a year. I wouldn't know where to get hold of a gun—in England, only crooks can get hold of them easily—and I wouldn't be confident of hitting anything, if I did have one.

All the time Barry Streets haunted me. Truly he did. I'd see his

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face on the back of my eyeballs, and wince at his laugh, and think about his expression when he twisted the waiter's arm. Sometimes it got scrambled and he'd be twisting Doris' arm, and I'd wake up sweating and grinding my teeth.

His name jumped out of the paper at me, the local weekly rag, several times a month. I read those bits over and over. Finally I came across one that made me swear out loud. Prominent businessman and popular ex-Rovers striker Barry Streets was being talked of as a potential Member of Parliament.

Ted Bassell, editor of the local paper, used the Working Mens' Club for the occasional game of snooker. Sitting on the fringe of the group, I started talk in the direction I wanted.

"I reckon he'll cakewalk it," Bassell reckoned.

I had to be very careful. "Are you sure, Ted? I don't know the fellow, but somebody was saying he's a bit too free with his hands, a bit of a bully."

Several voices rose to dispute that. Ted Bassell, no fool, just pulled a face. "Okay, our Barry's a bit physical when he gets his dander up. That won't lose him any votes in these parts. It's always been a touch town. Looking at some of the pantywaists we've got in Westminster, a lot of folks here will say it's time we sent a real man up to speak for us."

Keeping my mouth shut, I let others carry the ball. Albert Frake agreed, "The party committee will adopt Barry Streets, no doubt about it. Since the last general election, this is a marginal seat, could go either way next time. The Tories have been cunning, I'll give 'em that—Streets, a soccer hero, he'll cream off the working-class vote."

Utter despair overtook me when I got home that night. It says in the Bible that the wicked shall flourish like the green bay tree. That's always stuck in my mind since Sunday School, a world away. I don't know why a bay tree, in particular.

In my book Barry Streets was a murderer. Oh, granted, a murderer at one remove. Like a man who frays a rope and causes a stranger to fall down a cliff. The Bible also talks about an eye for an eye.

I was half out of my mind, no doubt. Long past midnight I was pulling a flat cardboard box off the top of the wardrobe, looking for photographs of Doris when she was a Brownie, and in the Girl Guides, and when she won second prize in a teenage beauty contest that to this day, I'm convinced, was rigged to make her lose the crown.

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Out with the photographs came some playbills and a few of the glossy, postcard-size snaps I used to autograph and give to landladies and café owners and barmaids. Archie Gee isn't impressive. The publicity pictures were labeled *The Great Quicksilver.*

Staring at that, my silly young face, the tawdry bits of stiff card going yellow, the whole thing sordid and cheap and pointless. . . well, I wept. It must sound strange, but I'd half forgotten those years as an entertainer. Now, coming on them as a stranger, somehow I realized what Effie had been ashamed of.

And then, with half a mind to burn the rubbish, I saw that the time, the effort, the doomed ambition, had been well worth it. I tucked one of the snaps into the frame of the bedroom mirror, pulled my shoulders back, and started to practise.

There's an old saying about it being better to wear out than to rust, which ignores the sad truth that men can do both at the same time. And I wasn't a well person, anyway. It took many months of rehearsals before I was satisfied. Mainly, apart from the mechanical skills, it's a matter of confidence, and that comes with constant practise.

Apart from anything else the rehearsals gave me something to do while keeping away from Barry Streets. He was ripe and ready, when I wanted him. Let my face drop right out of his awareness.

When I was ready—really, it was as if it was all ordained—Rovers, the town soccer team, got into the quarter finals of the Challenge Trophy, the next match to take place at Farehampton, the best part of a hundred miles away.

I bought a Rovers scarf and rosette, and was at Farehampton Athletic's ground that Saturday. It was easy to spot Barry Streets—a number of former Rovers players were in the front row of the grandstand, one row ahead of me. I'd paid a tout £20 for the ticket, gladly.

Rovers lost four-nil, and I was at Street's heels when he stormed out to his car. As I'd prayed, he didn't drive far, and I parked behind him. He and his cronies ate steak and chips, then went next door, to a big, furiously busy pub packed with Athletic fans, celebrating their win.

My chair in the saloon bar was next to the restroom. When Streets shouldered through the crowd and went in there, I nipped in as well. He wasn't long. Just through the swing door was a mirrored space with a machine dispensing hair cream and aftershave, where I waited.

He walked straight to me. "Mind yerself, Grampa!" Eyes of an

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octopus, cold and detached, no matter what his body was doing. At that moment, giving me a painful, scornful flick under the chin, while he glared down at a scuffmark on his suede shoe.

I shrank against the wall and he swaggered out. Peeping past the other drinkers, I saw him gather his friends and leave the pub.

The police car was still at the corner. I had guessed that the police wouldn't leave a rowdy pub, so close to the big match scene, unattended.

Streets had his hand on the car door when I hurried out, my shouts making gray puffs of steam in the crisp evening air. "Help! Stop that man!" The policemen got out of their car.

Streets was amused and one of his pals cackled as I gasped and panted past them to the police sergeant. "That man—in the pub—he robbed me."

"Calm down, sir." He looked at Streets. "That man, was it?"

Streets frowned and shook his head.

"I never—"

"Just a minute, sir. Step away from the car, please." Unobtrusively the constable moved between Streets and his friends, and their transport.

"He hit me, in the lavatory," I gabbled. "Made me hand over my money and my watch. He said he'd kill me if I didn't."

"Look, Sarge," Streets put in, "I'm Barry Streets."

"I know who you are, sir. I used to follow Rovers, when I was stationed there."

"Great. You're not dealing with rubbish, is what I mean. This old lunatic, don't know what his game is, but it's crazy. Me, a bloody mugger? I'm a company director."

"All I want is my money and belongings back," I announced quaveringly, and not having to try hard. "Maybe it was a joke."

Streets made what wasn't to be his first mistake. He tried to grab me. The sergeant stepped in, Streets's breath surged out, and he recoiled, stiff-armed away. "Look, Mr. Streets," said the sergeant, "this gentleman's making very serious accusations. As you've pointed out, you've got a position to maintain. There's no point in making an unseemly scene in the street. We'll sort it all out in peace and quiet, down at the station."

I hoped, for a dizzy instant, that Streets would refuse. But he gave in. The sergeant took his arm. "That's all right, sir, your friends can follow you. Any taxi driver will know where to find us. PC Driscoll will drive with you, and I'll give this gentleman a lift." . . .

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For the third time the Inspector said, "No need to raise your voice, Mr. Streets." And to me: "If you stop saying you won't press charges if you get your money back, we'll get on much faster. Now then!

"Mr. Streets, why don't you cut all this charge and countercharge nonsense short and just turn out your pockets? That's not even a request, it's a sensible suggestion—*I* think so, leastways—and you're entitled to refuse." His tone contradicted the claim.

Barry Streets, sweating, cursed and stamped and then ripped a wallet out of his inside pocket. It was soft leather with gold corners and it held his driving license and £30 in fivers and £6 in ones. He banged some change on the desk, along with his car keys, a penknife from his trouser pocket, and a bottle opener from the pocket on the other side.

"Just your jacket, the sheepskin, now," the Inspector muttered, as if talking to himself. He was tall, gaunt, balding, and you could tell he didn't like anyone in particular and expected no cooperation in return.

"I never carry anything—" Streets paused as his fingers touched something in the slit pocket of his sheepskin coat. He thought fast, but it was another mistake. "—in here, apart from the showroom float." Grudgingly, he brought more money out and added it to the items on the desk.

"Thirty-five pounds, three tens and a five," the Inspector said, counting it.

"My money!"

Streets shook his head. "Bloody old loony! It's mine."

I cleared my throat. "Soon settled. I've got the numbers in the back of my diary." I passed the little book to the Inspector.

He didn't look at it immediately. Instead, his stare impaled me like a skewer. "Always make a list of the money you're carrying, sir?"

"Yes," I lied. "I had a shop for thirty years. The bank manager advised me to list numbers and I've never got out of the habit, even with my pension money." The diary had three pages at the back, full of scribbled numbers in pencil and three different colors of ball-point pen.

Breathing through his nose, with a faint whistle, the Inspector agreed, "They match, right enough."

Streets blurted out, "Look, you know me. I could buy and sell this old toerag in my coffee break. Think I'd do him for thirty-five quid?"

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The Inspector showed his teeth. "I think the money in your pocket bears serial numbers listed by this complainant in his diary, sir. In fact, that's not a thought, it's a stone-cold fact." He went back to addressing himself. "An awkward one. I advise you to get your solicitor earning his salary, Mr. Streets."

As an afterthought the Inspector asked Barry Streets to empty the other side pocket of his sheepskin. And the hip pocket of his trousers, "which you overlooked just now." My watch was in the hip pocket.

Barry Street's next mistake was to come to my house two nights afterward. I'd taken a lodger three weeks' previously, but he didn't know that.

The lodger heard me cry out after Streets sent me flying, shoving the front door open. The lodger came pelting downstairs, making a lot of row, because he was still wearing his police-issue boots.

"I don't know what's the matter with you, Streets," Constable Overton told him. "You were in bad trouble at Farehampton after that football match. Mr. Gee was good enough to speak up for you, accept it as a practical joke that went wrong. Thanks to him, no charges were brought. Don't ever let me see or hear of you pestering him again. Get it?"

"I—I only dropped in to thank him properly," Streets mumbled.

Barry Streets's friends, who'd had to wait for him outside Farehampton police station, cannot have been very good friends, because gossip about what he'd done spread quickly enough to stop any further talk of him running as an M.P.

At Christmas, just about a month later, he was at a Rovers social, and when the ladies started collecting their things from the cloakroom, several fur coats were missing. The coats were found on the back seat of his car, under an old raincoat spread to hide them. Streets found them, actually, and was fool enough to try to sneak the stolen property back into the restaurant.

The next thing we knew, he'd done a flit and his car showroom was up for sale.

He moved away down south to a coastal resort, where I spent a holiday the following summer. He'd sold the garage at a bad time and put his dwindled capital in a restaurant-discotheque that wasn't doing well, when I arrived. On his days off Streets liked to lie on the beach with the vacationers. Two men's billfolds went missing

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and were found in the blazer that Streets was using as a pillow while he drowsed and tanned.

This time charges were made. He was put on probation, the newspapers playing it up for the human-interest angle. "Fall From Grace of the Player With Pace" was one headline. Emerging from court, flinching as the press cameras clicked, he looked flaccid and beaten. I doubted whether he'd throw his weight around, even with so much more to carry. So I went home.

I'm lying, of course. His punishment should only have been beginning. But that long drive to the coast, and my work on the beach, tired me out and I suspect that my next dizzy spell will be the longest yet. Eternity, in other words.

The district nurse pops in twice a week. My bed is in the front room, so that I needn't climb stairs.

A few weeks back, having written and phoned, the persistent young fellow from London, the TV producer, called on me. "You must have seen our show, being an old pro," he said. "Variety Archive, we're twenty-sixth in the viewer ratings. People love to hear about your kind of act."

"I don't watch TV," I said. "I'm conserving my energy. Got a very important audition in the offing."

He didn't catch on. "We've featured all the greats, Mr. Gee, and now we're exploring the lesser lights." A diplomat, too.

"Sorry you've had the journey for nothing, son. TV should have pestered me thirty years ago. All sorts of things might have turned out different."

"But you must come on the show! You're one of a rare breed, Mr. Gee."

I couldn't help smiling. "A dying breed, more like," I said.

But he still didn't catch on. "We've done them all in the series, Mr. Gee. Comics, singers, jugglers, acrobats, marksmen, escapologists. But never anyone in your line—The Great Quicksilver." Fair play for him, he was a genuine enthusiast.

"Never anyone like you—a top-rated showbusiness pickpocket."

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by

TA HUANG CHI

David Feng is back, investigating the mysterious disappearance of a Chinese jewel courier carrying a fortune in precious stones from Peking to Hoanfu. The trail of gems led to a charcoal burner's hut, to a magistrate's yamen, to the Street of the Silversmiths, to the Abode of Tranquillity with its shrine dedicated to the Star-god of Affluence . . . It was "a crime with no clear edges to its shadow" . . .

THE SPIRIT SWORD

by TA HUANG CHI

On a quiet evening in 1925 David Feng left the private courtyard of Peking's wealthiest dealer in pearls and precious gems.

"Ordinarily, Mr. Feng," his client had said, "when one of my couriers fails to arrive at his destination, I can reasonably assume he has been robbed and murdered or has decided to take his person—and my jewels—to parts unknown. Either way, I am forced to swallow my loss and go about my business. Not this time! I want him found. The belt he wore around his waist contained the most valuable consignment ever carried by one of my couriers. Do what you can for me in this matter, Mr. Feng. I will pay you well."

The man David was looking for had spent fifteen years carrying the wealth of others strapped next to his skin, passing safely disguised through a hostile land of petty warlords, gangs of armed bandits, and once honest farmers turned into brigands by famine. The courier's route lay westward from Peking to the ancient city of Sian where, posing as a hide dealer, he traveled south toward Hoanfu and journey's end.

Two days after passing through Sian, David Feng entered a small

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hill village. He was leading his lame horse. The village blacksmith wiped his hands on a spark-seared leather apron and looked up at the tall hawk-nosed stranger.

"I can't give you much," he replied to David's question. "I already own a fine horse. Bought it last week from a hide dealer who took the footpath across the high ridge of Hoanfu."

David traded his horse for five silver pieces and a stout walking staff and picked his way up the steep footpath. About noon he topped the ridge and came upon an abandoned charcoal burner's hut. A fitful wind haunted the tree tops around the clearing. The rest was silence.

David placed his lunch on a fallen log. His head turned toward the doorless hut. The sound had been too subdued to notice at first. Grasping his walking staff in a defensive position, he slowly approached the hut. The sound, still faint, became recognizable. He lowered his staff and knelt on one knee before the opening. The sound rose in a rush.

So did the odor. He leaned forward into the hut's dank twilight. A thin cloud of flies rose from their feasting. David forgot about lunch.

Sprawled on the floor was a piece of news that wasn't going to please his client one bit.

An early evening fog filled the gently sloping streets of Hoanfu. From the library in the district magistrate's *yamen,* a structure combining official residence, courtroom, office, and police station in one, David Feng could make out an oiled-paper lantern floating like the spirit of a white fox near the courtyard gate. Behind him he heard the click of ivory *hsiang chi* pieces being cleared by his host from the Chinese chessboard.

David turned away from the window as the magistrate, a tall scholarly man with a neatly trimmed gray mustache, straightened up from placing the last inscribed playing disk in its rosewood box.

"You were six days old and a war orphan when we first met," the elderly magistrate said, recalling 1900 and the bloody Boxer Rebellion. "Your adoptive American parents spent the night here before continuing their flight to safety on the coast."

"My parents often spoke of your courage and hospitality, sir."

The magistrate resumed his seat at the table. "Your chess game was off tonight," he said, replenishing their teacups.

"It's the courier's death."

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"Hide dealers often pass through Hoanfu, David. Are you quite certain the dead man was the courier?"

"He matched the description, sir. Before leaving Peking the courier had a slight accident that cost him the nail on his little finger. The scar tissue was new. The man I found in the charcoal burner's hut was definitely the courier. He was to deliver the gems here to a man named Alexi Palisoff. Do you know him?"

"A White Russian who took refuge in China after the October Revolution. He has a small shop in the Street of the Silversmiths."

"What does he look like?"

"A short man with a slight build and a close-cropped black beard."

"What about his character?"

"If you've ever dealt with a Shanghai gangster you'll have no difficulty in dealing with Mr. Palisoff."

David took a sip of his tea and asked, "Could you keep the courier's death a secret for a few days?"

"To what purpose?"

"*Tai ts'ao ching she,*" came the reply.

The magistrate leaned back and stroked his mustache. "Hmmm—beat the grass to frighten out the snake. Very well. But no more than two days. That's all I can promise you."

"There's one more thing," David added. "The courier was to have received cash on delivery. Palisoff has no credit in Peking. Is there anyone in Hoanfu who might have lent him that much money?"

The magistrate fell silent. He picked up the box of chess pieces, stored it in a cupboard at the far end of the library, and returned to his chair.

"Only one possibility comes to mind," he said at last. "A man named Han Chi. He has had business dealings with Palisoff in the past, but I doubt he has any free cash to lend. If rumor is correct, Han Chi is under considerable financial pressure at the moment—he owes money to several people including his business partner. You are aware of the situation in the northwest?"

"A pair of feuding warlords have cut the routes of the wool caravans," David replied. "I hear exporters are willing to pay almost any price."

"And that price," the magistrate pointed out, "will be Mr. Han Chi's price. In partnership with a rascally wool merchant named Lu Shan, he has stuffed his warehouses with the pure whites of Zaidam, camel's wool from Uliassutai, and the grays of Turkestan. This is the largest capital investment he has ever made in a single project."

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"How well do you know Han Chi?"

The magistrate's face sagged a little. "He is one of the tragedies of my office. It is common knowledge that he has a powerful friend in our government ministeries in Nanking. I am constantly reminded of it."

David's sympathetic response was interrupted by the arrival of a servant.

"I beg to disturb your Excellency," the servant announced, "but there has been a murder at the house of Han Chi."

"Han Chi? Who in his house is dead?"

"I do not know, Excellency," the servant replied. "Fright has reduced the messenger to babbling. He returned to the residence. Will your Excellency need the constables?"

The magistrate considered the question for a moment. "Tell them to be ready to leave with me in a few minutes. We will need the Petromax lanterns and a stretcher. I'll be with them as soon as I change."

The servant bowed and left. The magistrate tugged at the end of his mustache, sighed deeply, and turning to David said, "I feel there is something thicker this night than the fog. Your face bears an expression of curiosity, David. If you care to accompany me, it's only a few blocks to the house of Han Chi."

A softly hissing Petromax lantern had been placed on each side of the pathway leading to a small door in the courtyard wall and the narrow side street beyond. Clamped in interlocking rings of light, the body of a man lay sprawled on the fog-dampened flagstones. Two constables, their stretcher folded, stood apart in silent communion with the household steward near the courtyard gate.

The magistrate motioned for David to join him where he knelt beside the body.

"Tell me what you see," the magistrate said. "Your eyes are younger than mine."

David placed one hand on the back of the dead man's neck for a few moments before moving his hand up to the bald head. He examined the fatal wound from several angles before replying.

"From the weathered skin on the back of the neck, the tan color of the scalp, and the well-developed body muscles," David observed, "I'd say he was an active outdoorsman somewhere in his late forties. He shaves his head every day. I can feel the difference between a natural bald spot and where he had an active growth of hair."

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The magistrate pointed to the gashes on the side of the man's head. "What do you make of the wound? I confess I find it puzzling."

Daivd adjusted one of the Petromax lanterns to clear away a faint shadow. There were five evenly spaced cuts in a straight line, extending from behind the edge of the eyebrow to the back of the head, passing just above the ear. The wound looked like a series of crude dashes separated by much shorter lengths of unbroken skin. Each long-dash cut was about three-quarters of an inch long.

Blood had run down the side of the dead man's face, under the jawbone, and partway down the neck, before changing course to flow across the throat. A few drops had fallen to the flagstone path. The blood around the wound was smeared, prompting David to examine the victim's hands. The palm of the right hand was smeared with blood.

David returned his attention to the cuts. Using the tips of his fingers, David probed down both sides of the wound. His fingers told him what his eyes could not.

"The skull has been crushed along the line of cuts," David said, rising from the corpse. "It's certainly a peculiar-looking wound. It might have been caused by a heavy fall against a piece of ornamental iron work. I don't know."

"Nor do I, David." The magistrate stood up and beckoned to the two constables. "Remove the body to the *yamen* icehouse," he ordered. "Leave one of the lanterns with us." He turned to their unfortunate host, Han Chi.

Han Chi looked at him with distraught eyes set in rolls of fat. A blue waist-sash, securing his plain gray robe, underlined the merchant's ample paunch. Han Chi finished mopping his face and neck with a hot towel and tossed the cloth to his steward with a dismissing wave of pudgy fingers.

"Most tragic," he said, viewing the departing corpse. "How could such a terrible thing possibly happen in my own courtyard?" One trembling hand brushed a damp strand of black hair from his forehead. "Lu Shan was my trusted business partner. Now he is dead."

"Where were you at the time Lu Shan was murdered?" the magistrate asked.

"Sleeping in the Abode of Tranquillity," Han Chi replied, pointing to a small tile-roofed hut a few yards down the path. "Let me show you," he said and motioned for them to follow.

Inside, the single-room Abode of Tranquillity was aglow in can-

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dlelight. The magistrate tilted his head back and sniffed the air a few times.

"What is that unusual scent?" he asked Han Chi.

"*Lu-ts'ao,* sir. The pillows are stuffed with wild hops. I have been ill with severe migraine and confined to this room the past three days and nights. Dr. Ming said the odor of hops would help subdue the painful demons within my skull."

The magistrate stared thoughtfully at a small shrine dedicated to the Star-god of Affluence placed against the back wall. The cupped hands of the bristle-bearded money deity held the symbolic crystalline wealth of *Ts'ai Shen Yeh's* limitless bounty to the faithful.

"Dr. Ming also gave me a sleeping powder," Han Chi said to the magistrate, "that I might awaken refreshed to greet my guests. My steward brings me tea and hot broth each afternoon at the Hour of the Monkey. Finding me still in deep sleep, he waited beside my bed for over an hour. I awakened to good health. After giving thanks to the Star-god of Affluence, I ordered my steward to bring me the first beggars he saw by my main gate. He returned with three. I took a bowl of cash pieces from beside my bed and divided the coins among them."

Seeing the magistrate's puzzled look, Han Chi said, "The gift was in praise of the Star-god, a thing of good karma. At that moment my guests arrived. I ordered my steward to take the beggars out through the side gate that their odious sight not offend my honored guests. It was then the steward found the body of poor Lu Shan on the pathway."

The magistrate dismissed the troubled merchant with a reminder to report to the official scribe in the morning. He turned his attention to the room.

"This," he said to David, "is a side of Han Chi's character I never knew existed. Look about you. It is as simple and austere as a monk's cell. A narrow bed with a rice-straw mat, a small shrine for the Star-god, a bedside table devoid of inlays or carvings, and no rug on the floor."

"And no scrolls or calligraphy on the walls," David added. He picked up a tray from the corner and carried it to the foot of the bed.

The magistrate felt the covered bowl and teapot. "Cold," he pronounced. He lifted the cover from the bowl. "Broth untouched and—let's look in here—yes, the tea is also untouched." He picked up a bamboo cup from the bedside table and handed the cup to David. "Try it," he said, taking his finger out of his mouth. "From the

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metallic taste of it, I'd say he mixed his sleeping powder in that cup."

David agreed. He picked up a creased piece of paper bearing a red chop mark in its center. He refolded the paper along its original creases. "It's an apothecary's fold. Do you recognize the mark?"

The magistrate turned the piece of paper in his hand. "This is Dr. Ming's dispensing *chuan*," he said. "I have used his services myself." He returned the paper to the table and lifted a wooden bowl. "And this," he said, holding it up for David's inspection, "contained the cash pieces given to the beggars."

The magistrate then took up the last item on the table, a small stoppered bottle, and rotated it against the light. "Another of Dr. Ming's prescriptions," he observed. "*Mi-tieh-hsiang*, an extract of rosemary."

There was nothing more to see. Han Chi had created the replica of a monastic cell in the Abode of Tranquillity.

The magistrate carried the Petromax lantern to the center of the room. "You might as well replace the tray and blow out the candles," he said.

As David knelt down in the corner with the tray, he noticed a tattered piece of ribbon on the floor where the tray had been. He picked it up and held it in the light of the lantern. The ribbon was a quarter-inch wide, of red silk, about an inch long. Judging from the violently frayed ends, it had been torn out of a longer length of ribbon.

"It must have been there prior to four o'clock," David surmised. "The steward said he brought in the tray at the Hour of the Monkey."

"It is equally possible," the magistrate pointed out, "that it could have been stuck to the bottom of the tray and fallen off when you moved it."

David could have argued that bits of red silk ribbon were not a common item in a household kitchen. But then, he couldn't argue that it was a common item in a monastically barren retreat. Either way, he was as much in the dark to its significance as was the magistrate. David blew out the candles.

With the lantern between them they left the Abode of Tranquillity and walked back along the deserted streets toward the *yamen*.

"What we have here," the magistrate observed after a long silence, "is a crime with no clear edges to its shadow. Four of us searched for a possible murder weapon and found nothing."

"At least the evidence supports the statements of Han Chi and his

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steward," David noted. "The old servant was too frightened to lie, even for his master. We agree Lu Shan died about two hours before we arrived. Blood from the wound had coagulated. It's the pathway that disturbs me."

"I noticed that, too, David. He was attacked while standing and instinctively clapped his hand to the wound, indicating that death was not instantaneous. Lu Shan must have walked or staggered some distance—I hesitate to guess how far—before collapsing and dying. At that point the blood ran across his neck and dripped onto the pathway."

The magistrate's pace slowed to a stop. A slight breeze trickled up the river valley, leaving gaps in the fog.

"The gate," he murmured. "Lu Shan was wearing street clothes. I wonder if he used the gate to come and go without being seen by the servants? There is a bend in the pathway that would screen him from the Abode of Tranquillity even if there had been a window on that side. If so, what was the nature of the furtive business he wished to keep secret from his ailing host?"

David had none of the answers. A bit of red ribbon was eating at his mind like a rat gnawing at a sack of millet. The two friends remained silent, each deep in his own thoughts, until they reached the *yamen*'s rear gate.

The magistrate took the lantern from David and led the way to the icehouse. "Let's see how the constables performed their duty," he said.

Blocks of pond ice, separated by a thin layer of straw, were stacked against the walls. The constables had made a straw cushion to prevent Lu Shan's body from freezing to the ice. The magistrate nodded his approval.

As they stepped out of the chill into the warmer air, David thought he caught the fleeting scent of a distantly remembered spring day. He sniffed the night again. Only damp stones and fumes from a softly hissing lantern.

The guildmaster of the Gem Dealers Tong watched David's finger trace a meandering line on the map spread between them. David tapped his finger on the circled red dot marked Hoanfu.

"That is the third possible route between Peking and here," he said, straightening up from the map. "Someone knew which route the courier would be using and killed him at the charcoal burner's hut."

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"What courier would disclose his route?" The guildmaster tucked his hands into the long sleeves of his dark silk robe. "It could mean death to tell anyone," he said. "Even your esteemed client would not have that knowledge."

David rolled up the map and set it aside. "Anyone could deduce the route if he possessed one piece of seemingly insignificant data."

"What would that be?"

"Consider it from the viewpoint of any dealer in the city," David replied. "After a while he would begin to notice small things. For example, the length of time between a shipment leaving Peking and arriving in Hoanfu. If the time interval remained constant, it could mean only one thing."

The guildmaster's thin face brightened after a moment's thought. "Of course! He always travels the same distance!"

"Knowing the length of time," David went on, "the murderer could then eliminate all routes that could not be traveled in that time span. If you can confirm the courier's travel times for me, I may still have a chance of recovering the gems."

The guildmaster pushed a teapot aside and folded his hands on the table. From the river came the sound of the weekly paddle steamer blowing its second warning whistle for those still ashore.

"You are right, David," he said, as the echoes faded up the valley. "In reflecting back I recall that this particular courier's delivery times had become constant—tragically so."

"Then I must go to the Street of the Silversmiths." David took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. "This is a list of the stolen gems. They were all consigned to Alexi Palisoff."

"The Russian barbarian? By the Great Fo, you had best hurry! He was here this morning to sell me some of his miserable stock. He is leaving Hoanfu on the downriver steamer."

With a muttered apology David dropped the list on the table and rushed from the *tong* house as the final boarding whistle sounded. Thoughts bounced around in his mind like beads from a broken string. Palisoff had ordered the gems. Why was he leaving before taking delivery? The answer was simple. Palisoff had deduced the courier's route and taken murderous delivery at the charcoal burner's hut! He had timed it all to fit the schedule of the weekly steamer leaving Hoanfu.

David elbowed his way through a press of carts, rickshaws, and pedestrians. A few yards from the steamer he collided with a fish

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peddler's cart. David returned a struggling eel to its protesting owner and ran toward the gangplank.

The pale bearded face of the Russian stood out among the Chinese passengers and crew. He clutched a jewel case to his chest as he made his way through a tangle of ropes scattered on the railless foredeck of the paddle steamer. David used the last air in his lungs to shout the Russian's name.

Alexi Palisoff tried to turn. A loop of rope snared one ankle, sending him face down into a snarl of ropes. He looked up to see a tall Chinese leaping toward him across a pile of deck cargo. Still clutching the jewel case, the Russian scuttled away on his hands and knees like a crushed spider on a hot stove. Near the edge of the deck the Russian regained his feet in blind panic. He gave David one terrified glance and lunged away. His hands were still seeking a non-existent side rail when he and the jewel case sank without a bubble beneath the river's rushing brown waters.

David's hopes died with the Russian. Beneath the swift dark waters of the sediment-laden river Alexi Palisoff was beyond human help. David turned away from the gathering helpless crowd and walked slowly back up the street toward the *tong* house. It was all too much. Palisoff's plan had worked. Only his nerve had failed him at the final moment.

David returned to the *tong* house and described his tragic encounter to the guildmaster, ending with, "The jewels are now with the River God."

"Perhaps not, David. Your list of gems is an exact description of a jewel collection I was asked to appraise yesterday afternoon. Usually I make appraisals only for *tong* members, but this man told an odd tale. He said he had taken the gems to Alexi Palisoff for appraisal, but when he showed him the gems the Russian reacted as though he had seen a ghost. He flatly refused to touch them and suggested the man have me make the appraisal. My appraisal was apparently much lower than the man expected. He left in an angry mood. Find that man and you will find the gems."

David felt a surge of returning hope. "What did he look like?"

"He was a stout bald-headed man," the guildmaster recalled. "A wool merchant named Lu Shan."

David Feng was only slightly aware of the din around him and the press of traffic along chaotic Tea Flower Road. His visit with the guildmaster left him with the feeling that his mind had turned

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one corner too many. What had started as a cold trail in Peking was rapidly becoming a maze in Hoanfu, with Alexi Palisoff at its center.

He had missed Palisoff by a breath—literally Palisoff's last. From his reactions, the Russian was fleeing for his life. And with reason. He apparently got his first look at the gems when they arrived not by courier, but in the hands of Lu Shan. He instantly recognized the jewels. "Knowing they were stolen," David mused half aloud "why didn't he report it to the magistrate or one of his constables?"

Another possibility jolted David's mind as he crossed Tea Flower Road to the City Temple. Palisoff could have followed Lu Shan after the wool merchant left the *tong* house with his gems, followed him back along the foggy side street to Han Chi's courtyard gate, killed him, and taken the precious stones.

David wandered into the temple's open forecourt and seated himself comfortably among the exposed roots of an ancient tree. They fitted him like a familiar armchair. Across the courtyard a bald priest haggled price with a farm woman for one of the many *fen-shui* charms displayed on a ground cloth. David concentrated on his own breathing until the courtyard and the street noises faded to the farthest rim of his consciousness. Facts and conjectures bobbed and floated on his stream of thoughts. Some drifted by untouched. Some he selected and set aside, like a man sorting fortune sticks. There was no pattern.

David emerged from his speculations to the sound of a drum and the clash of metal. A pair of costumed street actors were recreating a famous battle from the time of the Three Kingdoms. People wandered in from the street. David moved closer to get a better view, enjoying the faces of the spectators. A tattered beggar slipped away from the courtyard wall and edged toward a wooden offering bowl beside the drummer's knee.

The actors' swords clashed and froze upraised, straining against each other. For a few seconds actors and swords made a frame around a still-life. The composition was perfect. It quickly dissolved into another rush of sword play. David had seen enough.

The image was frozen in his mind as rigidly as Lu Shan's body in the icehouse. On one side of the image, a tattered beggar. On the other side, a wooden alms bowl containing a few cash pieces. The shaven head of a priest floated above a ground cloth covered with healing charms tied with narrow red ribbons. Full meaning came with the drop of the players' swords. It pointed in only one direction.

Dr. Ming was a talented man of healing. He prescribed herbs and

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dispensed sleeping powders. How would the good Dr. Ming react, David wondered, when confronted with indisputable proof that he also dispensed death?

Final proof rested in the hands of Lu Shan. It would be the last scent on a cold trail. Dead or not, the bald-headed wool merchant still had something to say.

If David was right, the idea flowering in his mind would soon become a bouquet of rosemary, neatly tied with a bit of red ribbon.

David Feng carried his tray into the magistrate's library. Taking a slab of wood from the tray, he passed a cord through a pair of corner holes and tied the slab of wood to an alcove pillar. The remaining items, a glass-stoppered bottle and a leather pouch, were transferred to the table. The elderly magistrate entered as David removed the tray.

"Dr. Ming is on his way here," the magistrate said. "What do your actors' tableaux at the City Temple have to do with Dr. Ming and the courier's gems?"

"Everything," David replied, "including a dead wool merchant, the weapon that killed him, and why that weapon was never found. Dr. Ming supplied four ingredients to murder: pillows stuffed with wild hops, a potent sleeping powder, and *mi-tieh-hsiang* whose principle component is an aromatic oil of rosemary. We didn't smell it in the Abode of Tranquillity because its scent was masked by the overpowering odor of wild hops. I did smell it that night, but my mind was occupied with stolen gems and it failed to register. As to the fourth item, only a scrap remained—a piece of red ribbon."

His explanation broke off with the arrival of Dr. Ming, a slim man of average height with a brightly intelligent face.

The doctor's sharp eyes noticed the bottle of *mi-tieh-hsiang* bearing his chop mark. "I hope the Honorable Magistrate is not ill," he said in a kindly tone.

"It is part of my investigation into the murder of a wool merchant named Lu Shan."

Dr. Ming's face took on a look of professional detachment. "I heard about the crime while having my noon rice," he said. "How may I serve the law?"

"You treated Han Chi in the Abode of Tranquillity," David said. "What did you prescribe for his illness?"

"A combination of *lu-ts'ao* stuffed pillows and an ointment of *mi-tieh-hsiang*—excellent in the treatment of migraine."

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"You also prescribed a sleeping powder. What was it purpose in the treatment?"

"None, Mr. Feng," the doctor replied. "It was given solely at Han Chi's request."

"You also dispensed a fourth medicine."

A flush came over Dr. Ming's face. "If you are referring to that product of the *Ma Ma Ta Chuan*," he sneered, "I deny the efficacy of any charm based on the *Old Lady's Encyclopaedia.* Charms are superstitious nonsense! I did it only on Han Chi's strong insistence, much to my professional shame."

David untied the thong of the leather pouch and spread open its throat. "Are these the materials you used to construct the charm?"

To the baffled gaze of the magistrate and the surprise of Dr. Ming, David emptied a pile of Chinese cash pieces onto the table. "And this," David said, adding a spool of narrow red ribbon to the pile. "Would you be kind enough to show us exactly what you did?"

"Gladly," came the subdued reply.

Dr. Ming sorted the coins into three piles. He took a stack of twenty-five and arranged the coins in an overlapping straight line with their square center holes exposed. They watched him pass a double length of parallel ribbon through the center holes of the coins, drawing them into a flat, rigid pattern, fourteen inches long. He selected five more coins, laced them into a short flat pattern, attached it at a right angle to the charm, then added a cylindrical stack of forty at the end. Dr. Ming completed the assembly with a decorative knot and handed the heavy charm to David.

"By the Great Fo!" the astounded magistrate gasped. "It is a *Shen Chien*—a Spirit Sword!"

Grasping the sword made of coins tightly held together in both his hands, David raised it above his head. "The ultimate curative weapon against *fen-shui* demons," he said, walking toward the alcove post. "Or," he added "a wool merchant named Lu Shan."

David swung the sword in a vicious sideways slash against the suspended wooden slab. The edge of the Spirit Sword struck with a crash, rupturing the red ribbon and sending a clattering shower of loose coins about the alcove. He tossed the remains of the charm onto the table and handed the wooden slab to the magistrate.

"A perfect match to Lu Shan's wound," the magistrate murmured, running his fingers over the serrated indentations.

Dr. Ming's face paled. "I had nothing to do with the murder," he protested.

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"You had a great deal to do with it," David responded. "You not only supplied the weapon, but the means to convict the murderer. I refer to the *mi-tieh-hsiang*. Lu Shan got the ointment on his hands a moment before he was killed by Han Chi."

The magistrate cleared his throat. "Impossible, David. The sleeping powder was a strong one. Han Chi would have slept soundly for four or five hours. And besides," he said, "the servant was present, beside Han Chi's bed."

"The steward was merely a prop in Han Chi's play," David explained. "Han Chi owed Lu Shan money for wool purchases. Although a rich man, Han Chi was short of ready cash. He planned to solve that problem with the help of Alexi Palisoff, by conniving with him to set up the courier and rob him of a very valuable shipment. He probably promised the Russian a tempting share if he would place the order, and after Han Chi had killed the courier, quietly and safely sell the gems. Instead, Han Chi gave the gems to Lu Shan as a settlement of their debt.

"But Lu Shan was a sly one. He wanted an appraisal to make sure he wasn't being cheated. The nearest gem dealer to Han Chi's house is on the Street of the Silversmiths, where Palisoff lived. The Russian took one look at the gems, recognized them, knew he had been betrayed, and aware that Han Chi had killed once, feared he would be next. Lu Shan later received a low appraisal from the guildmaster at the *tong* house. He left in a rage to confront Han Chi."

"Did you see Han Chi take the sleeping powder?" the magistrate asked Dr. Ming.

Dr. Ming shook his head in reply. "No, he was hanging the *Shen Chien* above the foot of his bed when I left."

"Han Chi mixed the sleeping powder in a bamboo cup and left it beside his bed after emptying the potion in the courtyard shrubbery," David continued. "Lu Shan returned to the main house expecting to find Han Chi preparing to receive important guests. Not finding him there, he stormed into the Abode of Tranquillity. The trap was sprung. They had a quarrel during which Lu Shan tried to strangle Han Chi with his bare hands.

"Han Chi grabbed the *Shen Chien,* suspended above his bed, and struck Lu Shan. He collected the scattered coins into a wooden bowl, returned to bed, and waited for his steward to arrive at the Hour of the Monkey. After an hour of feigned sleep he had beggars brought in and distributed the *Shen Chien*'s fatal cash pieces to them. The

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murder weapon had now ceased to exist. No witness. No weapon. And a strong alibi."

"How do you know Lu Shan tried to strangle Han Chi?" the magistrate asked.

"Because Han Chi had applied the rosemary ointment to his face and neck as prescribed. That was the scent I became aware of at the icehouse last night and confirmed a few minutes ago. The ointment is on Lu Shan's hands."

Dr. Ming fingered the bottle of *mi-tieh-hsiang* in numb silence.

The magistrate looked at David and asked, "Where did you get this bottle of rosemary ointment?"

David's face broke into a pleased smile only slightly tinged with guilt. "From the same room where I found these," he replied, reaching into his pockets. A double handful of gems cascaded onto the table. "The precious stones ordered by Alexi Palisoff."

"You . . . from the Abode of Tranquillity?" the magistrate sputtered.

"From the cupped hands of the Star-god of Affluence, to be exact," David replied. "Han Chi removed the gems from Lu Shan's body and hid them for all men to see—but not recognize—among the symbolic crystalline wealth of *Ts'ai Shen Yeh* where no pious man would search."

The magistrate suppressed a disapproving comment. "If you gentlemen will excuse me," he said, rising from the table, "I have a job for my constables."

David Feng gathered up the precious gems and poured them into the leather pouch that had contained the red ribbon and cash pieces. "I wonder," he speculated to Dr. Ming, "if Han Chi has a macabre sense of humor?"

"In what way, Mr. Feng?"

David pointed to the coins scattered about the alcove. "In dissolving a partnership with cold cash."

"Q"

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a short story by

NEDRA TYRE

Another searing story from Nedra Tyre's book, RED WINE FIRST *(1947) . . . The people in this book "lived and died in three of the Southern states. They might have lived anywhere for they speak as all men and women do, of love and hate and human dignity and of the anguish caused when minds and hearts go unfed." The dialect is North Georgia rural . . .*

THEY SHOULDN'T UV HUNG WILLIE

by NEDRA TYRE

They shouldn't uv hung Willie. The more I study about it the more I know they shouldn't uv hung him. And Miz Watkins down the street keeps sayin to me, now Miz White I'm sure it's a terrible burden to bear, havin yore only son hung and what a disgrace he brought down on yore head and oh the shame you must be feelin. If I was you I couldn't show my face in public. Would jist be like tryin to shout above a thunderclap to try to explain to her how I feel and then I reckon she wouldn't have no more pity in her heart than the judge and jury. Folks like to look at things from the outside, wonder what they'd think if they really knowed about the inside. If they knowed that I don't think nobody'd ever raise their voice against nobody.

Many's the one said I made a fine match. Paw nothin but a cropper and me marryin Will that owned a farm and had a horse and two milk cows. Was a fine house he taken me to I reckon after the two-room shack paw and maw and us eight childern lived in. I'd git up early and build a fire and have Will's clothes warm by the cookstove

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afore I called him. I'd cook and scrub and hep in the field, I'd do everythin to please that man and he never said a word about nothin I done. Never even grunted. I reckon if he'd a said thank-you would uv busted his throat.

Wasn't nothin like that at maw's and paw's though you could see the Big Dipper right through the roof and we never had nothin much but fatback, but paw and maw had a way of makin you feel you meant somethin, had a way of makin you proud you was alive, sorta filled up yore empty spots with nice words or a smile. But Will, that man just went out of his way to be mean, like bein mean was his aim in life.

Them few months after I'se first married I'se mighty scared, jist went around tremblin, fraid the baby'd be a girl. I didn't care, you understand, but I knowed Will ud not be forgivin me. Mind you, all that time he never said a word about the baby a-comin, didn't ast me how I'se feelin. Oncet I jist broke down and cried, said I wanted to see maw. Will said if I'se a mind to walk the fifteen mile there and back and still git back in time to cook his supper it didn't matter none to him.

I won't be forgittin the night Willie was bornded. I punched Will and said you better go in a hurry and git Dr. Mack. Well now, Will says, you got mighty fine airs seein as how yore paw ain't nothin but a cropper. Dr. Mack knows I got two thousand dollars in the bank. He'd be chargin me fancy prices, maybe five or ten dollars. All the time Will taken his time about throwin on his clothes and a shufflin out and when he got back with a old colored granny woman the baby was already bornded. Lord God A'mighty, Will said, that baby's even uglier than you air, ain't no child of mine, looks like the devil hisself musta been in bed with you.

A little livin thing of any kind is sweet, seemed to me sometimes Will was almost gentle with the biddies and calves. Didn't take me long to know he was that way to them just because they meant money to him. And Willie didn't mean cash on the barrel-head to Will. Will was mean, downright mean to that child, sendin him into a cold room if he said anything, makin him stand in a dark closet if he made any noise. He tarminted the child, oncet he described the circus, told Willie all about the elephunts and monkeys and he said he was goin to take Willie. I was mighty proud, watchin Willie dance around the way a child ought, sayin maw how many days is it, maw how many hours, and then when the day come Will said naw I'm busy, can't take time off. Was like Will stripped Willie's little soul,

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was like he couldn't believe in nothin. I'd draw him clost to me when his paw wasn't lookin, would say child, child, don't break yore heart, won't be so many years till you can leave.

They was another awful cruel thing Will done. Seemed like Willie was just about to git over the circus disappointment, so Will he started in again, said it was nearin Chrismus, wondered what Willie wanted Sandy Claus to bring him, wondered if he wanted a little train, started in describin the cars and the double-headed engine, the lights that honest to God lit up, and all the tracks. I tried to hold the little feller's spirits down but childlike, look like he forgot his other disappointmint. So here come Chismus day and Will hauled out a big bundle. I wanted to thank God for makin Will do one good thing. Willie's fingers kep pullin at the strings and then he opened the box up and it was a great big doll.

Will he just roared and roared like old Scratch hisself. Yes sir, Will said, I left my order with Sandy Claus for a train but he knowed I had a little girl at home, you can't fool Sandy Claus. Willie's face got as red as a old gobbler's neck. He run off in the woods and stayed till after dark.

It was along about Willie's fifteenth birthday when it happened. He'd been a heppin his paw out in the field. Sometimes he would come in so tired he didn't eat his supper, would jist go right to bed. It got mighty late. I'd baked some biscuits special. His paw was out in the bar a-foolin around and I thought maybe Willie and me could eat by ourselves. Willie needed bolsterin up and I wanted to give him the assurance that his paw wasn't like no other person on earth I ever seen. You know that man never let Willie go to school one single day, said he needed him right there to slop hogs and chop cotton.

So that night I looked around for Willie. Went to the field, went to the shed, stopped by the privy and called out to him but he wasn't there. I eat by myself, then Will he come on in, eat like a horse, then went to bed. Well, I waited and waited, then finely I shook Will and said where's Willie, he ain't come home and I'm scared, maybe you oughta go git the sheriff. Will throwed his arm out like he wanted to hit me. Naw, he said, I ain't gittin no sheriff. And Willie he just didn't show up.

Days was mighty slow for me after that. I'd worry about Willie, off alone somewheres, maybe hongry, not knowin much, not havin no ejucation, not even havin any nice memories to comfirt hisself,

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and still when I stopped bein selfish I felt mighty satisfied Willie had the spunk to take off.

Five year just wore theirselves out. Will not oncet opened his mouth about the boy. One day he didn't know I'se in the barn. I'd gone down to git a few shucks for a cow that just freshened. Will, he come in a-scowlin, didn't pay me no mind. I never heared such words in my life as Will started a-utterin and a-cursin that pore boy cause he wasn't there to hep him with the work. And a strange thing happened, he scratched around in a corner behind some hay and so hep me God if Will didn't pick up the battlin stick I used on the washin after I biled it and he struck out at them clothes uv Willie's as if he was strikin death blows at his only son.

One night not long after that Will and me was settin in the kitchen eatin and I had a funny feelin, kindly shuddered like they say you do when somebody walks acrost yore grave. Will was a-leanin over his plate soppin up gravy with his biscuit and the door blowed open, like a strong wind had struck it or somebody had kicked it open. I heard somebody yell, you damn old bastard, and afore I could ketch my breath they was some shots. Will fell over his plate and his face dug into the gravy like a pig rootin, then him and the plate and his chair all banged to the floor.

Willie was standin at the door. Howdy, maw, he said, is the old bastard dead? Then Willie he drug a chair out from the cook table and set down. In a little while, maw, he said, I'll be goin into town and tell the sheriff what I done. I just wanna set here a minute or two and I'll thank you for some coffee.

I went around to the cookstove bein careful to cock my head so's I wouldn't see Will layin there. I poured Willie some coffee and he stirred the sugar in it till I thought he was gonna grind plum through the cup. And he started talkin. For five year I tried to forgit, he said. For five year I tried to be a man instid of somethin whimperin, apologizin for livin. You know, maw, he made me feel like a dog all my life. I nodded at him. I said, Willie, the Lord Hisself don't know what yore paw done to you.

I didn't innerrup no more, seein that Willie had a mighty lot of talkin to do in a mighty little time. I'd git a job and tremble over it, he said, not feelin like I was worthy to be paid. I'd see a girl smilin at me and knowed couldn't never be nothin like that for me. Yep I stuck it out for five long year. Finely, didn't seem like they was nothin in my mind but to kill him, wasn't room for nothin in me but hate for him.

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Then Willie went on recollectin all the mean things his paw had done to him, recitin them like he was a phonnergraph or a player pianner a-playin over and over the mean cruel things his paw done and the black hate he had for his paw. Every now and then I'd git up and chunk the fire and make a little more coffee and Willie set right there talkin till sunup. Well, he said finely, guess I'd better be gittin on into town, maw, and don't you worry about me.

I didn't want to stay on at that old farm where they hadn't been nothin but misery, anyways I wanted to seel it to git a lawyer for Willie's defense. The lawyer was mighty quick about takin all the money I had, looked like he wasn't too innerrested in doin much for Willie though.

I went to the trial, helt my head up. Judge ast Willie on the stand if he had anything to say for hisself and Willie said, I just wish I'd a kilt the old son of a bitch a long time ago. Judge said in a pious voice to the jury, I think you can have but one decision for a man who talks like that about his own father.

After they convicted him I'd go to see Willie in the jail. Looked like I didn't have much to say to him though I wanted to tell him the things I'm tellin you now. Willie though he talked a awful lot tryin to comfirt me. Now, maw, he'd say, don't you be a-worryin, for the first time in my life I'm sleepin without no dreams that make me wake up in a sweat. I feel kindly peacefullike. Maybe it's account of I've wiped out some of the hate and meanness in the world.

And I couldn't cry none when they hung him, looked to me like they was killin somebody that had been dead all his life.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

INTRODUCING RAVEN HOUSE: After five years of careful planning and market testing, Canada's Harlequin/Worldwide has launched Raven House Mysteries, a paperback imprint promising four new or never-before-reprinted mysteries each month. September's introductory advertising and publicity campaign was unique in publishing circles, complete with mystery cruise around Manhattan for writers, editors, and reviewers. For readers, the books contain an unusual bonus feature—a one-page Minute Mystery by Austin Ripley, with the solution obtained by phoning a toll-free number or writing an address given in the book. Readers who phone receive each month's solution, along with properly eerie sound-effects and a plug for forthcoming Raven House titles.

Though there are no widely familiar mystery names among the first eight authors (some of them pseudonymous), Raven House promises future titles by Dell Shannon, Hillary Waugh, William Campbell Gault, Sara Woods, and Harold Q. Masur. All books are 224 pages and sell for $2.25.

CHRISTIE & CAIN: More than five years after her death Agatha Christie continues to be the most reprinted and analyzed mystery writer. Everest House has just published *Agatha Christie: The Art of Her Crimes* by Julian Symons, with an Introduction by John Fowles and illustrations by Tom Adams ($22.50). And Dodd Mead has added four titles to its Greenway Edition of Christie: *Murder Is Easy, Evil Under the Sun, The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side,* and *A Pocket Full of Rye* ($8.95 each).

Four years after his death another writer still very much in print is James M. Cain. Holt, Rinehart & Winston has just published the first hardcover collection of Cain's short stories, *The Baby in the Icebox* ($14.95). And Avenel Books, Crown's imprint for its inexpensive hardcover omnibus editions, is reprinting *The Postman Always Rings Twice, Serenade, Mildred Pierce,* and *Double Indemnity* in one volume for $6.98.

CHANDLER LETTERS: Published collections of mystery writers' correspondence are rare indeed. We have had excerpts from many Raymond Chandler letters, arranged by subject matter, in *Raymond Chandler Speaking* (1962), and more re-

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cently we've had a slim collection of correspondence between Chandler and James M. Fox (1978). But now we have a massive 616-page collection, *Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler* (Columbia University Press, $19.95), edited by Chandler biographer Frank MacShane. Included are fascinating letters to Ian Fleming, Alfred Hitchcock, E. Howard Hunt, Lucky Luciano, Somerset Maugham, and scores of others.

Speaking of Chandler, Ruth Windfeldt (owner of The Scene of the Crime Bookshop) and Dana Holliday have founded The Raymond Chandler Society. An annual dinner and other events are planned in the Southern California area. Membership is $25.00 a year, from The Raymond Chandler Society, 13906 Ventura Blvd., Suite 303, Sherman Oaks, CA 91423.

DR. THORNDYKE LIVES!: Rex Stout's Edgar-winning biographer John McAleer has taken over publication of *The Thorndyke File*, a six-year-old semi-annual journal devoted to a study of Dr. John Thorndyke and his creator R. Austin Freeman. The issues for Spring and Fall 1981, the first to be published by McAleer, each contain 36 pages of articles, stories, and observations of interest to all Thorndyke fans. Subscription is $5.00 a year for two issues ($6.50 foreign), from John McAleer, Mount Independence, 121 Follen Road, Lexington, MA 02173.

MYSTERY QUIZ: Do you know Father Brown's first name? Or the author of the first mystery in which the narrator was the murderer? Answers to these and many other questions are in the *Mystery Reader's Quiz Book* by Aneta Corsaut, Muff Singer, and Robert Wagner, just published by Evans ($9.95 cloth, $4.95 paper). A companion volume, *True Crime Quiz Book* by Jay Robert Nash, is also available.

RECOGNITIONS: Frederick Ungar's fine Recognitions series continues this month with the first book-length study of P. D. James and her work. Norma Siebenheller's *P. D. James* is priced at $10.95 hardcover and $5.95 paperback.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Bill Pronzini and John Lutz have teamed up for their first collaborative novel, a police procedural about a series of murders in one block on Manhattan's West Side. Tentatively titled *The Eye*, it'll be published by Dell in late 1982.

Lawrence Treat is editing the 1982 Mystery Writers of America anthology, dealing with expertise and specialties in various fields. It's tentatively titled *A Special Kind of Murder* and Doubleday will publish it in June.

The Penguin Crime Monthly for January is *Rumpole's Return*, another collection of John Mortimer's stories and the basis for a third series of Rumpole TV dramas on the PBS *Mystery!* series.

A novel by Ken Darby titled *The Brownstone House of Nero Wolfe* will be published by Little Brown & Company in March.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

The saxophones in concert beneath the tattered bandshell are playing the old tunes, sweet and sentimental, melodies from the past hanging in the steamy Florida dusk. The waves of the Atlantic roll hot against the dark piers. On the boardwalk, a young lawyer named Ned Racine (William Hurt) stands sweltering, looking for a night's distraction in a life going nowhere. A young woman separates from the crowd: she looks cool, interesting, married maybe. He makes his move. She is haughty, distant, but amused. ("You're not smart, I like that in a man.") Matty Walker (Kathleen Turner) is rich, with a home in an affluent community farther up the coast and a wealthy older husband away often on business. By their second meeting Ned and Matty are lovers. Soon that love becomes obsessive and it's clear that the husband must somehow be removed from the picture. The tide which pulls Ned into murder, and the backlash after, is the dramatic force of *Body Heat*, certainly the best mystery this year, a crime film of merit and distinction.

Much of the mood and dialogue of *Body Heat* is a deliberate throwback to the film *noir* classics of the postwar American period. Ned and Matty are vividly reminiscent of the doomed couples in *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, triangular passions where the equation always equals murder. But it is not mere slavish imitation on the part of Lawrence Kasdan, who both wrote the screenplay for and directed this brilliant film. Not only does it rank with the best of the *noir* greats, it returns the screen to a style of mystery that has been dormant for decades (with *Chinatown* being perhaps the only major exception). The destructive, impassioned affair, the verbal exchanges, the deceit, the feeling of claustrophobic despair—all the great traditions are in evidence here, but handled with intelligence and new skill. And the ending, though cryptic and not fully explained, will have you shivering with shock and surprise.

What makes *Body Heat* so absorbing is its tension and intensity—every line is weighted with insinuation and turbulence, and the humid Florida setting almost exhausts the viewer with clouds of steamy nightmist and flattening sunshine. (The faded community of Miranda Beach, a decaying Miami backwater, does not exist but is a perfectly recreated composite.) Every role is superbly filled. "I wanted to do a film in which even the smallest part would have a life of its own," says Kasdan, who previously wrote the screenplays for *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and here—in a setting far from galactic outposts and Middle Eastern treasure digs—he fashions interesting peripheral characters: an earnest police detective who finds friendship getting in the way of a crime probe, a glib, tap-dancing district attorney,

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a beachfront bellhop, who remembers some insistent phone calls.

You'll remember *Body Heat*, a searing, dark tale of murder, good from its moody beginning to its dynamite finale.

A growing new outlet for mystery drama in the years to come will be cable television; as viewer systems expand and multiply the mystery enthusiast need only sit back and cheer. Recently the Home Box Office system taped, for future showing to its nationwide subscribers, a production of William Gillette's venerable stage play, *Sherlock Holmes*, as staged by the Williamstown Theater Festival in Massachusetts, where—as said *The New York Times*—"many of the finest actors and actresses in America have performed in the world's best plays." This production has certainly upheld the tradition. Good as the Royal Shakespeare Company's version of a few years back may have been, the new *Sherlock Holmes* surpasses it, a definitive staging that happily has been preserved for present and future pleasure.

The casting is first-rate. Frank Langella, memorable recently as a romantic Dracula, here is a romantic Holmes—yet probing and intense as well. That team of villains, the treacherous Larrabees, have never been better: Madge is played by the strong-willed Susan Clark (*Babe, Amelia Earhart*), and Larrabee himself is done to sniveling perfection by Stephen Collins, the dashing commander of *Star Trek, The Movie*. The insidious Professor Moriarty and his attendant thugs are properly criminous, and the settings are huge and elaborate, from the sinister Stepney Gas Works to Watson's cozy study.

Interestingly, the production has used as its text a 1901 version of the play rather than the shorter, later version done by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and several fresh lines are startling. Moriarty (George Morfogen) talks about taking less of a cut from a certain swag because one of his underlings was badly hurt during the robbery—which certainly somewhat humanizes the Napoleon of Crime!

And, finally, when led away in handcuffs he doesn't just say to Holmes, "We shall meet again," but adds ominously that wherever Holmes might travel on the Continent there will be "eyes that see and wires that tell." A canny prescient reference to a primitive form of international telecommunications of which this cablevision presentation is the delightful present tense.

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"Q"

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INTERVIEW: CLARK HOWARD (2)

This is the conclusion of an interview that began in the previous issue.

EQMN: How did you happen to start writing professionally?

HOWARD: Back in Chicago, when I was out of the Marines, I got a night job switching freight cars for the Northwestern Railroad, and enrolled at Northwestern University on the G.I. Bill, taking journalism and creative writing. While in Korea, at a rest camp in Inchon, I'd decided to see if I could write a western short story. I did a thing called "The Last Gunfight." About 900 words. Later I read in *Writer's Digest* that some pulp magazines wanted 5,000-word westerns, so I expanded the story and it became my first sale.

EQMN: Did your courses at Northwestern spur you on?

HOWARD: On the contrary, my creative-writing professor dissected one of my stories one day and told me and the rest of the class that it was perfectly awful and that as a writer I was hopeless. I had already sold the story for $300.00, but I never told him or the class—I just left school that day and never went back.

EQMN: And?

HOWARD: I started writing in earnest. All kinds of stuff—pulp westerns, war stories, crime stories. I won a special award in a short-story contest sponsored by *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and eventually got together with agent Alex Jackinson through Victoria Benham, an *AHMM* editor. I've been with Alex now for sixteen years.

EQMN: What was your first book?

HOWARD: It was called *The Arm*, about a professional crapshooter (an "arm"). I wrote it in 1967, then wrote twelve more novels before turning to true-crime books, which I find more challenging because of the research involved. I'm now researching my fourth true-crime book, about three brothers who murder three brothers in the rural South.

One of the most interesting things about my career is that I receive so many letters from old Depression Era outlaws who served time in Alcatraz—the subject of *Six Against the Rock*—or were part of the old Ma Parker gang, or are trying to locate friends from the old days. I find myself acting as a clearing house for forwarded letters a couple of times a month.

EQMN: With your Tennessee and Chicago backgrounds, why do you live in Texas?

HOWARD: My wife Judith is a marketing executive for a large communications firm and was offered a promotion in the Texas division of her company. Prior to Texas, we lived in Las Vegas for ten years.

EQMN: Do you have any advice for novice writers?

HOWARD: Sure. Forget about the writing schools, the how-to books, and all the people who want to "teach" you how to write. Just sit down and write. Don't try to be fancy—write like you talk and like you think. Never force it. Let it come naturally. That way it will be the best you can do.

Then be thankful if it's good enough.

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

As interest in religion seems to be on the upswing in our society, its spiritual, doctrinal, political, and economic aspects are becoming increasingly frequent subjects in mystery fiction. In the books reviewed below, for example, we have a fundamentalist Protestant group building a repeatedly collapsing tower to Heaven (Spencer), a Catholic archbishop kidnaped in an effort to influence him to save a church slated for demolition (Layne), a Jewish scholar troubled by the efficacy of the cross as an anti-vampire weapon (Wilson), an attempt to rescue the daughter of an Indian businessman from the clutches of a possibly fraudulent Southern California swami (Keating), and a new addition to the ranks of nun detectives (Quill).

*** Ross H. Spencer: *Echoes of Zero*, St. Martin's, $9.95. It's tempting to say this novel reads like a collaboration of Bradbury and Brautigan with an occasional tip from James M. Cain, but Spencer—funny, enigmatic, nostalgic, sentimental—is a writer who creates his own niche, a full-blown original. The detective here is Rip Deston, reporter and ex-ballplayer. Differences from Spencer's paperback originals are slight: some paragraphs have more than one sentence and quotation marks are used.

*** Marion Margery Layne: *The Balloon Affair*, Dodd, Mead, $8.95. This terrific action story, a strong effort in all departments, represents a collaboration of three women. A multi-balloon hijacking occurs at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, the work of an altruistic group protesting a proposed tax on solar energy. The involvement of a drug ring complicates matters for all concerned. My only question: would things really have turned out as splendidly in real life given the circumstances?

*** F. Paul Wilson: *The Keep*, Morrow, $12.95. Who or what is messily killing off German soldiers stationed at an eerie Romanian castle in 1941? The answer comes in an elaborate, zestful, deftly executed horror novel that will appeal to a broad range of readers.

*** H. R. F. Keating: *Go West, Inspector Ghote*, Doubleday-Crime Club, $9.95. Bombay cop Ghote becomes involved in a situation familiar to private eyes: a wandering-daughter job.

His reaction to the Southern California locale is the main attraction of this novel, though the thinnish puzzle includes a locked-room mystery. Keating's version of American speech and L.A. lifestyles is usually exaggerated for comic effect without being distorted.

** Monica Quill: *Not a Blessed Thing*, Vanguard, $9.95. If the idea of Nero Wolfe-as-elderly-nun appeals to you, look into this new series by Ralph McInerny, operating under a *nom de plume* that punsters will appreciate. The writing has wit and charm, and some of the characters are well drawn. The plot, though, is rather strained.

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*** H. Paul Jeffers: *Rubout at the Onyx*, Ticknor and Fields, $10.95. Here we have another star-studded private-eye historical, this one set against a backdrop of the New York jazz scene in the Thirties. Newcomer Harry MacNeil plays lead shamus. Among the guest performers: Art Tatum, Paul Whiteman, George Gershwin, Mayors Walker and LaGuardia, Walter Winchell, and Owney Madden. The latter two are particularly well done, and the atmosphere proves more involving than the complicated plot.

*** Richard A. Moore: *Death of a Source*, Raven House, $2.25. The second case for Atlanta journalist Bob Whitfield has the crisp style, incisive characterization, and fine use of background that marked its predecessor.

*** Eaton K. Goldthwaite: *First You Have To Find Him*, Doubleday-Crime Club, $9.95. An old pro who is durable if not prolific—he debuted in 1942 and this is his tenth novel—tells the story of Long Island newsman Frank Merson and his efforts to help his trouble-prone twin brother. It's a smoothly professional job with a nice gimmick at its center.

*** Ron Goulart: *Ghosting*, Raven House, $2.25. Though it features a cast of comic-book and comic-strip artists, this is in a slightly less comedic vein than most of Goulart's work. You may see the surprises coming, but the telling, characters, and fascinating background make it all worthwhile.

** George Ogan: *To Kill a Judge*, Raven House, $2.25. Private eye Johnny Bordelon's first adventure is relaxed, low-key, unpretentious tough stuff, with an emphasis on good food appropriate to the New Orleans background. The solution seems a surprise or two short.

Seasonal note: *The Twelve Crimes of Christmas* (Avon, $2.50), edited by Carol-Lynn Rossel Waugh, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Isaac Asimov, is the first anthology to my memory of yuletide mysteries. Asimov's historical-scientific Introduction points out the special impact of wrongdoing committed during a season marked by festivity and good will. The fine selection points up the difficulty of doing a mystery anthology that is not an *EQMM* anthology: seven of the dozen stories first appeared in these pages, and three others have been reprinted here. Among the notable contributors: John Dickson Carr, August Derleth, Stanley Ellin, Edward D. Hoch, Ellery Queen, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Rex Stout. Merry Christmas!

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In which is given an accurate Description of the Coroner's Enquiry into the murderous Assault upon the person of Mr. Thomas Taskett, a tax-collector of His Majesty's government, and the unlawful Seizure of the Contents of his green leather money-satchel; and a faithful Portraiture of the taproom and bar-parlour of the Red Lion Inn, Crossbury, where certain Events occurred in the presence of the Coroner's Jury during an Inquest conducted in the year of our Lord 1794; with other interesting and instructive Matters; a Tale told by a Bagman

THE INQUEST AT CROSSBURY

(in the manner of C———— D————,
author of *Creak House* and *The Mystery of Edwin Brood*)

by JOHN H. DIRCKX

The annals of the Law, gentlemen—said the one-eyed bagman, when he judged that an audience worthy of his powers of declamation (I will not say, of invention) had assembled before the fire—the annals of the Law may record weightier and more awesome deliberations than the enquiry into the death of Mr. Thomas Taskett which was conducted in the year 1794 at the Red Lion Inn at Crossbury; but none superior to it in point of general interest and historical precedent. My uncle, who travelled for Tiggin and Welps, was among the numerous company in attendance at that memorable session, and he often said that he would not have missed it for a month's commissions on German silver spectacle-frames and gilt-edged pocket Bibles.

The subject of the inquest, Thomas Taskett, was no less familiar a figure in all the country towns round Crossbury than my uncle, with whom he often shared a seat on the Dover mail. Tom Taskett belonged to that cheerful tribe of hired thieves called into being by a wise and benevolent government, some decades before the time

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I am speaking of, for the advancement of society and the suppression of agriculture—in short, he was a tax-collector.

My uncle learnt of Taskett's murder on the very day of its discovery. Arriving at Crossbury late one afternoon, and entering the Red Lion to order a private room, as was his custom, he found the dining-hall thronged with company, as if it had been a market-day. In the bar-parlour, where he presently took refuge to eat his dish of mutton and swallow his pint of ale, he discovered the landlord, Jollicks, deep in conversation with a couple of his regular customers, both of them well known to my uncle. One of these was a battered veteran of the Spanish wars, Corporal Trough by name, who had once smelt gunpowder at Havana upon a shift in the wind. The other, a gentleman artist from London who rusticated a good part of the year at Crossbury, was just receiving from the landlord a circumstantial account of the discovery of Tom Taskett's murder.

To reduce Master Jollicks' narrative to a few words—a job of abridgment that would have quite exceeded Master Jollicks' own powers: a party of labourers, passing over a little-used path in quest of noontime refreshment, had found all that was mortal of Thomas Taskett sprawled in a ditch—all that had not lately fled to whatever corner of the Eternal Kingdom is reserved for the accommodation of tax-gatherers. The stout leather satchel in which Taskett had been in the habit of carrying his receipts was found lying next to him, "gashed and gutted like a hare."

Mr. Bradge, the painter, shook his head sadly, and the look of settled melancholy that he usually wore grew darker and more settled. To my uncle, ever a sympathetic listener, Mr. Bradge had once confided the Great Disappointment of his life. His highest ambition was to paint the sunset as viewed from a piece of rising ground on the edge of town known as Shaftoe's Tumble. Day after day as the shadows lengthened, Mr. Bradge spread out his canvas there and brought forth the paraphernalia of his art. But by the time he had got his colours mixed to his satisfaction, the thing was over; the curtain had gone down on the spectacle, and the next evening he had his work to do over again, with the same dismal result.

"So poor Tom is killed, is he?" said Mr. Bradge. "I don't know what else can be expected, when a man goes about with large sums in gold on his person, and lets it be generally known who and what he is."

"To be sure," agreed Jollicks, who was fond of a joke, "there's no honour among thieves."

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"Hang it, though," put in my uncle," Tom Taskett never went his round alone. I never knew him to stir a step without a guard at his heels."

The hostler smiled a melancholy smile full of superior knowledge. "The soldier who was told off to accompany him on his round is lying at Sandwich with the gout," he said.

"Lying in the pesthouse, more like," growled Corporal Trough, clacking his surviving teeth with a sound like the rattling of sabres. "We were a lean and ragged troop in '62, gentlemen, but not one man amongst us ever experienced a visitation of that same gout. A disgrace, I call it, for one of His Majesty's soldiers to be lying sick of the gout, and an enemy of the Crown lurking in every hedge." He rolled his eyes in despair and applied to his ale-pot for succour.

"Ah, that's your idea, is it, Corporal?" said the landlord. "A highwayman? Well, it isn't mine, nor Mr. Mockem's the coroner, neither."

At this, all three of his auditors expressed a lively curiosity to hear the coroner's view of the case, but Jollicks suddenly became as close as an oyster. "The full particulars will be made public at the inquest," said he. "They shall sit upon the body at three o'clock tomorrow in this very room." He nodded solemnly towards the rear part of the dining-hall, where a passage led to the stable yard, and added, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, "Poor Tom's remains rest at this moment in the woodshed, though I should lie myself blue in the face sooner than have it known to any of the gentry above stairs."

My uncle, being a close student of public events, and persuaded that his attendance at this session would ensure his welcome at any fireside in the kingdom for the next quarter of a year, resolved to alter his plans and stop another day at Crossbury. The landlord warned him that a considerable crowd was expected, but intimated that for a monetary consideration so small as hardly to be worth mentioning, a seat might be reserved in the bar-parlour.

On the next morning my uncle was aroused from his slumbers before dawn by a pair of drovers who happened to quarrel beneath his window. Coming down to make an early breakfast, he found a pretty numerous company already assembled in the dining-hall. The case of the murdered tax-collector was on every tongue. The bar-parlour, which communicated with the dining-hall by a wide doorway, had been transformed overnight into a chamber of justice, its Turkey carpet taken away to some safe repository, and every inch of its floor occupied by as miscellaneous a collection of chairs, benches, and stools as any second-hand furniture shop could have

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supplied. The dining-hall had been similarly outfitted as a kind of penny-gallery.

By half-past one there was not another place to be had in the house. My uncle, who was mounted on a joint-stool between Mr. Bradge and Colonel Trough, congratulated himself warmly upon his foresight in procuring a seat. The front rows were thronged with gentry, even Sir Berkeley Farafield having driven down from his country seat at Abbot's Cross to make one of the company. From the inn-yard a huge crowd gaped in at the open windows, a curiously motley assemblage jumbled and wedded together in that rude democracy which rare spectacles and a common purpose often call into being.

For the occasion Jollicks had resurrected a quantity of stale, flat, and formerly unprofitable biscuit, which he retailed to the restless mob with the affecting air of a man who parts with his dearest possessions to succour the needy. His wife, a short, thickset person from whose features all traces of youthful plainness had not yet departed, was plying a brisk trade in the cheapest ale in the place at twopence a glass.

Promptly at three the jury assembled in the bar-parlour to be sworn, and then tramped out again under the marshalling eye of the coroner's officer to view the remains lying on a trestle in the woodshed. Presently they returned, some of them pale and shaken, but one or two landed farmers looking not altogether displeased that some murderous highwayman had chosen a tax-collector for his victim.

The coroner, Mr. Mockem, senior partner in the firm of Mockem and Breakmany, solicitors, opened the proceedings by instructing the jury in its duties. Mr. Mockem's bearing and manner were nothing if not majestic, but to my uncle's eye something of the majesty was lost by his presiding at a bench which was at all other times the domain of Jollicks the tapster, and which even now was adorned with placards celebrating the virtues of Swann's Five Star Porter.

The coroner first called upon sundry citizens of the place to identify the deceased, and then heard the evidence of the three labourers from Weatherall's farm who had found the body. Mr. Mockem was one of those gifted persons who know what a man thinks, and means to say, better than the man knows it himself. In scarcely any time at all, he had reduced the testimony of these witnesses to a plain and coherent narrative and dismissed them with warm expressions of gratitude.

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Before Mr. Mockem upon the bench there lay, in Melancholy array, the dead man's effects—a pair of worn and mud-stained boots, a tin watch, a little pile of silver, and the ripped leather bag from which the murderer had abstracted an unknown sum of money. Casting his eye over these pathetic relics, Mr. Mockem shook his head gravely. "It is our purpose," said he, in a lofty and resolute tone, "to enquire in what circumstances and by what means Thomas Taskett, an agent of His Majesty's government, was yesterday launched into eternity by the inscrutable dispensations of Providence."

So he expressed himself; but it was my uncle's opinion that Mr. Mockem's notion of Providence was but a dim sort of antithesis to such improvidences as leaving one's umbrella at home when the black clouds are billowing in from the East, and that the nearest approximation to eternity of which his mind was capable was the duration of an action in the court of chancery. Be that as it may, he grew pretty eloquent, in an abstract and sombre vein, on the subject of poor Taskett's demise.

Mr. Mockem's officer was his law clerk, a spare-figured and forlorn-looking young man called Jack Fewtch. Jack kept his mouth perpetually screwed to one side in a sort of resigned and superior sneer, as who would say, "You may talk of your troubles if you like, yes, and weep over them, too, but it's plain you haven't the capacity even to conceive what misery *I* am forced to bear." Fewtch may not have had much, but he had a motto. "The great thing," he told himself stoutly and often, "is to get on." He had got on into an articled clerkship, and a marriage, and a mortgage; he had got on in years, in cares, and in debts; but he had never got on in the world. In spite of that he had ended by believing in his own rallying cry, which on fitting occasions he went so far as to utter to his principal.

He uttered it now. At a hint from Jack Fewtch, Mr. Mockem announced that he would next hear the medical evidence. Whereupon Dr. Cramp, a distinguished-looking person with auburn hair just touched with silver, and an air of benevolent sagacity, stepped forward and took his oath. The doctor was known for miles around as a man of infinite discretion and boundless charity. He was more magnificent in his blunders than many a lesser man in his triumphs. The grieving widow kissed his hand in gratitude, the fading consumptive lived only from one of his calls to the next. The bereaved father might question the decrees of Providence, but never the counsels of Dr. Cramp.

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This redoubtable practitioner deposed that on first examining the remains then lying in the woodshed, at half-past twelve on the previous day, he had "found the deceased to be lifeless, defunct, and devoid of the vital spark." He further testified that the cause of death was a rapier-thrust through the body, which, penetrating the heart, the left lung, the spleen, and other vital parts, had been the occasion of a lethal hemorrhage.

When Mr. Mockem had discharged the witness, he surveyed the jury, who sat on a pair of wooden settles beneath a shelf of glasses and tankards. "Gentlemen," he announced, "this is murder, and we are to enquire how and by whom this fearful crime was compassed. It might be asked how Mr. Taskett happened to be walking alone and unprotected in a deserted place with a bag of money. As an agent of His Majesty's government he might have had a horse. But every man and woman in this parish knows that in fair weather Tom Taskett preferred to go his round by the marrow-bone stage—in plain language, on foot. As for his being alone and without a guard, there is one here who can supply an explanation."

Jack Fewtch now summoned from a seat in the front row a bright-eyed, quick-featured young man in a green broadcloth with metal buttons. This person stepped forward briskly, took his oath, and with a cheerful air gave out that he was Captain Humrigg, on leave from his regiment, the 47th Foot, then garrisoned at Sandwich.

Mr. Mockem fixed the young officer with a look calculated to impress upon him the gravity of the proceedings. "Will you tell the jury what you have already told me and several others on the subject of Private Buckle?"

"Willingly, sir, willingly. Private Buckle, of my regiment, was appointed some days since to escort Mr. Taskett in his round through his district. A brave and honest soldier is Buckle, sir. No man is more attentive to his duties. But all the fortitude and resolution in the world are no proof against bodily ills. The plain and short of it is, sir, that Buckle is laid up in the infirmary with gout—a painful and violent attack, sir. The surgeon doubts that he will be on parade this fortnight."

"A melancholy history, Captain," said Mr. Mockem. "I am sure that we all wish Private Buckle a prompt recovery of his health, or, failing that, a fresh accession of fortitude. Did his superiors appoint another in his place?"

"They did, sir. But when the other soldier reached Dover, where

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he was to meet Mr. Taskett, he found that Mr. Taskett had gone on alone."

"Has your own presence in Crossbury anything to do with this affair?"

"None in the least, sir."

"Were you personally acquainted with Mr. Taskett?"

"I had not that pleasure, sir."

"Thank you very much, Captain Humrigg."

"Captain Humbug!" said Mr. Bradge to my uncle. "It's my suspicion that that young man is no more an officer in the Army than he is a scarecrow. I shouldn't be much surprised to learn that he is no other than Count von Nobsdorf, the foreign confidence trickster who has been operating in the district."

"In that event . . ." began my uncle.

"In that event," put in Corporal Trough, his eyes afire with ale and indignation, "he himself has probably made away with Private Buckle as well as poor Tom Taskett."

"I now call," said Mr. Mockem, "upon Squire Laphlowd, whose charge it is to preserve the King's peace in this parish, and to bring malefactors to justice."

Squire Laphlowd rose ponderously from his place in a remote corner of the room and after a slow but uneventful crossing came to stand before the bar. The Squire's substantial person, swathed in endless folds of brown flannel, spoke of rich dinners and copious imbibitions of port, and hinted gently at abundant holdings in consolidated Bank annuities. The Squire was a county magistrate, a justice of the peace, a churchwarden, and the president of two charitable societies and another for the Suppression of Vice. He was the chairman of the hunt club and he held an hereditary commission in the local train-band. Why he was not also coroner was a question which he could answer only by supposing that the Lord Chancellor harboured some deep and violent grudge against him. It was of no use to tell him that a coroner was customarily drawn from the ranks of either the legal or the medical profession, because his grandfather had been one under George II, "and he knew no more of law or physic than a common tinker."

The Squire bowed to Mr. Mockem with condescension made to look like deference. "Before we can fix the guilt for this crime upon its author," said he, in a tone suggesting that he was about to dispense the wisdom of a Solomon, "we must discover who was present with the deceased when the fatal thrust was given." A murmur of

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assent, rather high-spirited in the circumstances, went round the room.

Squire Laphlowd stepped to the window, viewed the prospect which it commanded, and invited the company to do likewise. "The place where the deceased was found can just be seen from here," he said. "That grove on the hillside marks the spot. The ditch where the body lay runs along beside the path that leads from Aspadder's farm, there in the dale, to Weatherall's. Since that path leads nowhere except from the one farm to the other, it follows that if a man is travelling along it, he must be going from one farm to the other.

"Now it is an odd thing that among the deceased's effects here lying upon the bar—I would say, the bench—there is no register of the monies he had received. I have therefore instituted enquiries with a view to learning which of the two farms he had visited. And,' he concluded portentously, wagging a stout and eloquent forefinger at his auditors, "both Farmer Aspadder and Farmer Weatherall are prepared to take their oaths that Mr. Taskett never called on them yesterday."

Mr. Mockem looked about the room, and ventured to remark, "I do not see either of them in the room."

"Farmer Weatherall," said the Squire, raising his voice in the manner of a man who is lawfully seized of the floor and means to keep it yet a good while, "Farmer Weatherall pleads the press of business as an excuse for his absence, and Farmer Aspadder declines to appear in a matter that does not in the least concern him." He paused reflectively, but not long enough for the coroner to put in a word. "I need not tell this company the history of Farmer Weatherall and Farmer Aspadder," he said, and proceeded to do it.

"It is pretty well known that Mr. Aspadder formerly owned a large tract of land in the valley, stretching towards Winterford. In the past four years, on account of poor harvests, and frosts, and floods, and rank bad management, Mr. Aspadder has been forced to sell most of his land to Mr. Weatherall, who owns the adjacent farm." In his zeal to publish what was already well known, the Squire did not go to the length of mentioning that Mr. Weatherall was his son-in-law. "In fact, Mr. Aspadder has been reduced to penury.

"Now it is plain that as Mr. Taskett was murdered on the path between the farms, he must already have called upon either Weatherall or Aspadder. And it is equally plain that if both of them deny having seen him, one of them lies. And it wants no great penetration to see that the one who lies must be the one who murdered him. As

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we have no means of proving which farm Taskett visited, we must consider the persons, their conditions and motives. Mr. Weatherall is a man of wealth and position, a man well known for his honesty and generosity, who would not hurt a fly. Why should he raise his hand against the King's agent?

"His neighbour Aspadder is a man of sour tempers and black humours, careless of his affairs and hard pressed for money, who has not appeared in church nor uttered a civil word to any of his fellow townsmen this half year. Is it not probable that after paying over his tax he followed Mr. Taskett along the path, murdered him out of greed and spite, and recovered what he could ill spare?"

The Squire pausing for breath and rhetorical effect, Mr. Mockem snatched the opportunity to resume control of the session. "Not so clear, perhaps," he said hastily, "as one might wish. Is there any proof that Farmer Aspadder saw Mr. Taskett yesterday, or that it was he who ran Taskett through the body with a sword, cut open his money-satchel, and made off with his papers and his receipts?"

"Proof, sir? No, sir. Not yet," replied the Squire. "But," he added darkly, "it shall be provided—very presently provided, sir."

At this moment a tall, well-built young man, who might have been mistaken for a gentleman but for his sober and thoughtful demeanour, rose up in the middle of the bar-parlour and craved permission to address the company. My uncle at once recognized Smoak, the sexton, son of the famous bankrupt tallow-chandler. Smoak took a little after both parents, having inherited his mother's olive complexion and his father's debts. Some said he had once been a clergyman, but that was only a rumour put about by his enemies. Smoak inhabited a tumble-down cottage next to the churchyard, where he laid out his small income in beer and candles. As the end of the month drew near, any late passerby with a sharp ear might hear him sipping in the dark.

"I hope," said Smoak, addressing the coroner, "that I may speak plainly? It seems hardly fair to accuse Farmer Aspadder of robbery and murder when he is not present to speak in his own defence." Squire Laphlowd's brow clouded, and he gave strong marks of irritation, but he held his peace.

"Have *you* anything to say in his defence, Mr. Smoak?" asked Mr. Mockem.

"Only this, sir—that if most of his land has passed into the hands of Weatherall, then he had very little to gain by stealing back his tax from the collector." Here the jury stirred in their seats and

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exchanged glances and nods. "Mr. Weatherall had the greater tax to pay," pursued Smoak. "Why should Mr. Weatherall not be the murderer?"

This observation set off a general eruption of debate in all quarters of the room. The coroner having restored the participants to order by hammering upon the bar with a bung-starter, Mr. Smoak concluded his remarks thus: "As for Mr. Weatherall being honest and generous, I don't call it honesty when a man grows rich by rapacity and deceit, nor generosity when he profits by his neighbour's misfortune to buy land at the tenth part of its worth."

"What!" cried the Squire, giving the company a gratuitous view of his back teeth. "Weatherall not honest? Weatherall not generous? You move me, sir, to hilarity." He might call it hilarity, but to my uncle it looked uncommonly like bad temper.

Parson Glebe now addressed the bench and intimated that he wished to impart some reflections of worth to the assembly. The parson was a handsome figure in a worldly sort of way, but a trifle lame owing to the iron-shod tyre of a milk dray having passed over his foot when he was a lad. Assuming his best pulpit manner, the parson began: "I have listened with the greatest interest to the opinions ventured by Squire Laphlowd and by Mr. Smoak, but I confess that I find neither of these ideas, or theories if I may so style them, entirely satisfactory. Yesterday morning Mr. Thomas Taskett rose up a sound and healthy man with no care in his soul save only to carry out his commission as an agent of government. Yet, ere the sun had reached the middle point of its daily course, Mr. Taskett had answered a summons that admitted of no excuse and would suffer no delay—had been snatched out of our midst to, as we hope, a better world." The parson's tone grew so earnest and mellow that he seemed to fancy himself standing at the verge of an open grave in the churchyard, instead of in the taproom of the Red Lion Inn addressing a coroner's jury. My uncle said he even held up his hands before him as if he had got the Prayer Book in one of them and a clod of earth in the other.

Jack Fewtch inspected his watch and suggested to Mr. Mockem, by an elaborate show of frowns and smirks and stirrings of the hands, that it would be a good thing to get on.

"Your observations, Parson Glebe, place us deeply in your debt," said the coroner.

"But you have not yet had them," objected the parson. "I was just going to say that, although Squire Laphlowd has demonstrated with

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faultless logic that either Mr. Weatherall or Mr. Aspadder must, to his shame, have told a lie when he denied having seen Mr. Taskett yesterday, there is nothing to show that *either* of them told the truth. Indeed, sir, I think it likely that they both saw Mr. Taskett yesterday."

This remarkable declaration was a signal for a fresh outburst of debate. "Do you mean to suggest," enquired the coroner, hammering away with his bung-starter, "that the two farmers conspired to murder and rob Mr. Taskett?"

"Not in the least," replied the parson, with a benevolent and imperturbable smile. "The Squire has advanced the argument that Mr. Aspadder murdered the tax-collector out of malevolence and greed. Mr. Smoak has shown that Farmer Weatherall had an ample motive for robbing the collector. But we need not conclude that the two farmers acted in concert. I suggest that Mr. Aspadder met Taskett walking alone, fell on him in an access of rage and hate, and left him for dead in the ditch. Mr. Weatherall, coming along a short while later, finds the tax-collector lifeless. He knows that his satchel is full of money, from the fact that he has just filled it himself by paying his land-tax. He takes the opportunity of emptying the satchel and recovering, as it were, his own property."

When Mr. Mockem had quieted the assembly, he drew himself up to his full height and assumed an attitude of judicial solemnity. "I am grateful to you, Parson Glebe, for your observations, and likewise to the Squire and Mr. Smoak. But," said he, rushing on as if he feared that still further observations might blossom forth from some unexpected quarter, "this is not the time nor the place to convict the murderer. Our purpose is only to establish the identity of the deceased and to rule on the manner in which he met his death. As it is not immediately apparent who killed him, we must be content with recording a verdict of wilful murder against some person unknown."

The jurymen, taking these remarks as a signal that the inquest was nearly ended, prepared to withdraw, and a great commotion of shuffling feet and humming voices arose in the room.

"Yet," resumed Mr. Mockem, holding up his hand imperiously for silence, "yet I cannot conclude this session without expressing my own view—a view, I may say, that rests on the most palpable and weighty evidence. I conceive that it is perfectly possible that both Weatherall and Aspadder saw Mr. Taskett yesterday—yes, even likely. But I cannot admit the probability of Parson Glebe's inference

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that the poor man murdered him and the rich one robbed him. Surely that sets at defiance everyone's observation of human nature.

"No, gentlemen, I offer for your consideration this view of the affair. I suggest that Mr. Weatherall, who was required to give up to the tax collector a far greater sum than Mr. Aspadder, followed him along the path and murdered him, venting his wrath against the Crown upon one who was merely its agent, and hurrying away from the place afterwards lest he be seen. Mr. Aspadder then coming along the path and finding the tax-collector dead, and his satchel ready for plucking, helps himself to his neighbour's taxes to relieve his own poverty."

The session had lasted long. The windows burned darkly with the declining rays of the sun, and some of the onlookers in the inn-yard had already fallen away to tramp home before dark. Mistress Jollicks was just threading her way among the benches assembled in the dining-hall to light the burnished pewter lamps above the fireplace when with a shriek of mad terror she dropped her taper and stood gaping and pointing towards the door to the stable-yard, which slowly rocked open on its hinges to reveal the apparition of a gaunt and spectral figure, its jowls tied up in a kerchief, hovering in the shadows.

Every eye was bent upon those waxen features, every tongue was turned to lead. The ghastly form, treading without sound (owing, no doubt, to its boots at that moment lying on the bar before Mr. Mockem) drifted unsteadily into the midst of the company, who recoiled from it in horror, and spoke a single word in a hoarse and hollow voice that might have come from beyond the grave, or at least from behind a damp and mildewed wall of old stone, thickly covered with cobwebs and ivy.

"Buckle!" was that word, and as he pronounced it, the grisly visitor pointed an accusing forefinger at the spruce young man in green who had called himself Captain Humrigg, and who was cowering at that moment half under a table in a state bordering upon apoplexy. Having uttered that accusing and damning word, Mr. Thomas Taskett sank down insensible upon the floor.

Dr. Cramp was first into the breach. With an exclamation of professional zeal he sprang to the aid of the fallen man, whose life he had pronounced extinct the day before, calling for brandy and chafing the patient's temples with the utmost vigour. He persevered in these efforts until Tasket was quite restored, in spite of the violent objurgations of a woman sitting close behind my uncle, who advised

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the company that Dr. Cramp was "no better than a butcher, that don't know a fit from a fever." My uncle learnt afterwards that her husband was a chronic invalid upon whom the doctor had attended for seven years without supplying an answer to her prayers.

Squire Laphlowd now took the proceedings into his own hands, where, in his view, they should have rested from the beginning. Private Buckle was hauled up before the bench, charged in summary fashion with dereliction of duty, murderous assault, robbery, and perjury, and committed for trial at Maidstone Assizes.

Mr. Mockem, in a paroxysm of dudgeon, took three or four paces backwards and vanished into the shadowy passage by which the risen Tom Taskett had entered the hall. No doubt Mr. Mockem was right to quit the field, for it would be hard to imagine anything more superfluous than a coroner where there is no corpse. As for Jack Fewtch, he gathered up his papers, nodded respectfully to the late-lamented Taskett, and retired in perfect order, no doubt telling himself that the great thing was to get *out*.

So ended the celebrated inquest held at Crossbury in the year '94. My uncle used to say that the wild beast show at Greenwich Fair was a fool to it, and the ghost in *Hamlet* a mere jigging pantaloon. In consequence of its extraordinary outcome, the Red Lion Inn became a place of some notoriety, and was for a time frequented by persons in search of sensations and novelty, but my uncle had it from Jollicks himself that nothing whatever happened there afterwards.

Thomas Taskett recovered his health and lived to go his round for many more years, and (such is the irony of fate and the fallibility of popular rumour) his unexpected revival was taken as a proof of Dr. Cramp's superior skill, and was as good for the doctor's practice all his remaining days as a testimonial from the King.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

CLEMENTS JORDAN

Palmer Pool, known to his playmates as Pike, was as close to being the town's Huckleberry Finn as you can imagine. All the kids, especially the boys, looked up to Pike, envied him, and would gladly have changed places with him . . .

FINAL TURN

by CLEMENTS JORDAN

Everyone thinks that many people had motive to kill Pike Pool, but nobody knows I had reason to. I've held it against him ever since I found out about it, but it really worked on my mind since the watch and the fishing. Some might think I ought not to blame him for what he did, but he changed my whole life, made me the way I am now, and people have been killed for a lot less.

I had known Pike all my life. Our folks were neighbors and our community was so small we had only one of everything—one church, one general store, one school—so we saw a lot of each other. None of us was rich in those depression days, but we were mainly farmers so we had enough to eat—most of us.

Pike's folks had less than most. There was a gang of them—ten children. Pike was one of the youngest and some of the oldest had left home by the time he and I were coming up. That is, they were married and supposed to be living away, but some of the girls, on the outs with their husbands, were always turning up with a couple or three kids to stay a while. Now and then one of the boys would lose his job in the city and bring the wife and kids to visit good old Pa and Ma. So pretty much all the time there seemed to be as many under that roof as ever, disputing, laughing, crying, and rollicking

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in general. A stranger passing day or night might think there was either a party going on, or a killing.

I was an only child. My parents were comfortably off—as industrious and respectable as church deacons on Sunday. They kept me clean, well-fed, and bought me new shoes every fall. They sent me to school every day and to church on Sunday. But I'd have swapped places with Pike any day.

I don't know if his mother was too busy or whether she didn't care, but Pike went to school to suit himself. He showed up mostly in bad weather or when he didn't feel well. He'd laugh and say when the weather was fine or he felt good it was dumb to waste time in school. This poor attendance got him left back some, so he was a couple of years older than most of us. He was scruffy-looking too. Half the time the teacher would send him to the rest room to wash up. Pike would jump up to leave the room, winking to let us know he came dirty on purpose in order to miss class. The teacher couldn't do anything about his clothes though. They were not too clean and something was usually missing—a button, a shoestring, or his socks, if he had on any, didn't match. We other boys admired him and wished we could go barefoot as early in the spring as Pike did.

We'd gather around him at recess with open mouths to hear his outlandish stories about his family—stories that would have mortified our families in language that would have got our mouths washed out with soap. "Hot damn, you oughta heard Pa when Beau come home from Lena Weems's house about two o'clock this morning. Said if anything happened to Lena . . ." We'd try to laugh knowingly.

Another time: "Monty's got to lay low right now. He thinks the government men's after him. He's got the blamedest hideout you ever saw, with a lantern and blankets and a rabbit trap. He said he was going to let me come down there sometimes. When he does, you bet your patootie you won't see me around here." This story supported the popular belief that there was bootlegging in the family.

No one could have convinced any of us boys that we were better off than Pike. We thought he had the greatest times in the world. I was his closest neighbor and would have given anything to be counted his closest buddy, but to tell the truth, he was always off hand with me. I would sneak away to his house every chance I got but a lot of times Pike left while I was there. He just had something to do and went on with it. I'd sit in the kitchen where most of the family usually stayed.

There was always something entertaining in all those kids playing

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and squabbling. When things got too much for her, Mrs. Pool would turn from stirring something on the stove or washing something in the tub and lash out at the nearest kid, sometimes with the stirring spoon or a wet garment still in her hand. They would quiet down a little but not for long. Everybody knew she wasn't really mad at anybody.

I never dared stay long, but somehow my mother knew where I'd been and make her displeasure known. She would not say she considered the Pools beneath us but would accuse me of neglecting chores and homework. We understood each other. I'd wait a few days before I went to visit the Pools again.

Then came the day I saw Pike for the last time in years. He was nearly sixteen and kept saying he wouldn't have to put up with school foolishness much longer. It was one of those discouraging spring days that come after you've had a couple of pretty ones. It turned colder than it had been for a month. There was a nasty drizzle with a spiteful wind that blew rain in your face from every angle.

Pike came to school for the first time in over a week looking swollen about the face—felt like neuralgia, he said. We didn't know what that was but it sounded serious. The teacher looked at him narrowly a few times and finally walked back to his seat and put the back of her hand under his jaw.

"Does your face hurt right here, Palmer?"

"Naw'm," Pike said scornfully.

She put her hand on his forehead. "You seem to have a temperature. Did you check it this morning?"

Someone snickered at the idea. Pike turned red and glared in that one's direction. "I feel okay," he muttered. But he was too sick to stand it and left soon after lunch without telling or asking anybody. He never came back to school and a few weeks later one of the other children said he'd left town with Monty.

More than forty years passed before Pike came back to his hometown. During those years my graduation from high school that had once seemed such a milestone had come and was long gone. I'd been to a war, returned home, taken a civil-service examination, qualified for a job in the post office, married, and settled down. Then Maude left me and we got a divorce. We never had children and some women get restless without an anchor. Later she married again and had a couple of boys. I used to think her husband might die and she would come home to me and bring the boys. I would have made them

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welcome. They grew up, though, and I never got to see either one of them.

I never married again but stayed by myself. My parents died and left me the house and a few dollars too. I've got as much as one man needs. I had a job, a good one, until I retired.

Pike came back ten years ago. I can't say whether he was rich but he showed a lot of style—wore a diamond ring on his little finger, drove a fancy car, and introduced us to the third Mrs. Pike Pool. She was considerably younger than Pike, but crazy about him. Make no mistake about that. Pike hadn't changed all that much. He was bigger, broader, balder, but his nature was the same. He was as loud and talkative and swaggering as ever.

Wherever he went folks still gathered to hear his tales and listen to him laugh and watch him flash his money. He always seemed to carry a roll with him and always managed once with every audience to find a reason to bring the roll out under everybody's eyes. It was rumored he made it bootlegging in the 30's, black marketing in the 40's, and had some other questionable connection now. Someone said some shady-looking characters had come looking for him at different times. Someone else had heard raised voices, unfriendly ones.

Pike settled in at his old place, empty now, the old folks long dead. A brother or two hung around at times, though they didn't stay long. Sometimes the clan glathered on a Sunday or a holiday and it was old home week. There were still plenty of kids and one turned out to be Pike's grandson and we found that Pike had grown, married children by his first wife.

And the years went on. Pike and I were on speaking terms but we didn't have a lot to say. I went to my job every day—I was the postmaster now—and Pike just hung around town. Nearly every day I'd see him across the street on the porch of the general store. There'd be a bunch of loungers laughing at his yarns as he sat on the railing leaning up against the porch column. He would be talking away, waving the hand with the diamond, and would suddenly bend his face down to the crowd as he delivered his punch line. The roar they'd let loose came loud and clear to me as I sorted the mail or weighed parcels.

Finally Pike would step down from the rail, take out his wallet, riffle through his bills, then disappear inside the store. Mrs. Bingham said one day, "He oughtn't show that money around like that. Ought to put it in the bank and write checks." She was right, I thought.

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Then my retirement time came. I didn't much want to retire but they didn't make exceptions in Civil Service then, as I hear they do now. They invited me to dinner at the county seat along with a few others retiring that year and wined us and dined us and gave us presents for "loyal and faithful service." To Herb Tillson, the only one I knew, they gave a handsome set of luggage and made a speech about how he would now get to see the world. Everybody got something that I guess they figured suited him best. I got a watch and compliments about my punctuality all my working years.

A watch is good to have when you're young. It tells you when to go to work or reminds you there is someone waiting for you somewhere. When you're old, it only reminds you that it's later than you think and will soon be as late as it will ever get for you. It was one of those watches that tell the day, month, and year (as if any fool wouldn't know the year at least), as well as the hour, minute, and second. I walked around town some with it on my wrist and got compliments on it. Finally I took it off and put it in a drawer.

For forty years my job had taken up most of my day and now I had nothing to replace working. I took to reading. Once every week I'd catch the bus to town and get some books from the library. In the spring I planted a garden patch and it took up some of my time all summer. I sat on the porch a lot and watched folks go by and swapped "howdies." But it didn't take me long to figure I wasn't having a big time.

One day Pike passed with that grandson of his. That boy must be around fourteen or fifteen, a lot like Pike at that age—he walked like him, stepping out free-like and covering a lot of ground. They had fishing poles and were heading for the river. Pike saw me on the porch and hollered that I'd better join them. "We're just two old bachelors. Wife's visiting her folks. This one's leaving tonight. School's starting next Monday and old Frank here'll be back in jail."

I made some excuse not to go. They didn't really want me. I think that's when my heart took its final turn against him, or maybe it's when they'd gone a piece up the road and the kid said something and Pike roared out his laugh and rubbed his knuckles over the kid's head and the kid laughed too, sounding just like Pike.

A few days before I had seen a lawyer and we talked over the idea of selling my house and things and paying it all to a home. It guarantees you someplace to live the rest of your life and there's plenty of company there so you'd never be lonesome. I'm going to think it over. Those rooms remind me of coffins, comfortable but confining.

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Well, all those things—the home, the watch, my piddling life—brought my thoughts about Pike to a boil. I waited until I saw him drive by taking the kid to the bus station and drive back home. I waited till dark, loaded the gun I had brought back from overseas (which I never mentioned to anyone), and went over and knocked on Pike's door.

When he came to open it, I just shot him—right where he laughed. I leaned over, took out his wallet, removed the money, and holding the wallet by my shirttail, wiped it good on the rest of my shirt, and threw it out in the bushes.

I took the money home and burned it in the stove, just in case. As I said, I've got enough for one person. The gun I wrapped in newspaper and put in my book bag. I took it to the city and buried it in a garbage can in the alley of a store, down among rotting fruit and cabbage leaves.

The sheriff and officers asked me and everyone else if we'd seen or heard anything unusual over at Pike's. I said I'd noticed nothing, but everybody else began yarns about all the oddball characters who had been coming to see Pike and arguing with him. They spent a lot of time trying to trace down some of those men. Old stories about bootlegging and black markets were brought up. Everyone said again how foolish he'd been to carry all that money on him and show it the way he did. I expect they'll have enough to talk about for a good while.

Pike had a better life than I've ever had but I don't begrudge him all the good times. I honestly don't. But he kept me from having much of a life. My wife left me because she wanted children that I couldn't give her. You see, that last day Pike came to school he had the mumps and gave it to nearly all of us, but I was the one who suffered most, whose life it ruined. Maude and I struggled on for a couple of years, but we might as well have filed for divorce the day the doctor examined me and asked if I ever had the mumps. After I answered, "Yes," it was all over but the shooting. No, I'm not trying to be funny.

I'm alone and it's all Pike's doing. I never had any kids to frolic around the house or a grandson to take fishing. On those documents that say NEXT OF KIN, I always have to write NONE.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Loren Mensing story by

FRANCIS M. NEVINS, JR.

Have you ever heard of what might be called Queen's Law? It goes like this: if amateur detectives of fiction lived in locked rooms, with all windows and doors bolted on the inside, with walls, floors, and ceilings fortress-solid, with no possible contact with the outer world, not even by telephone, all this in an isolated house hundreds of miles from civilization, with armed guards surrounding the house day and night—even if amateur detectives of fiction lived so completely incommunicado, crime would still seek them out and find them.

Loren Mensing, law professor and consulting criminologist, whether in a crowded airport or on the top floor of a 20-story high-rise, is not immune to Queen's Law . . .

THE SHAPE OF THE NIGHTMARE

by FRANCIS M NEVINS, JR.

On the afternoon of the second day before Christmas, just before the terror swept the airport, Loren Mensing was studying the dispirited and weaving line in front of the ticket counter and wishing fervently that he were somewhere else.

He had turned in his exam grades at the law school, said goodbye to the handful of December graduates among his students, and wasted three days moping, with the dread of spending the holidays alone again festering inside him like an untreated wound. The high-rise apartment building he'd lived in for years was being converted to condominiums, dozens of tenants had moved out and dozens more

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had flown south for the holidays, and the isolation in the building reinforced his sense of being alone in the world.

He had called a travel agent and booked passage on a week-long Caribbean cruise where, if he was lucky, he might find someone as seasonally lonely as he was himself. A *Love Boat* fantasy that he tried desperately to make himself believe. He drove to the airport through swirling snow that froze to ice on the Volkswagen's windshield. He checked his bags, went through security at the lower level, and was lounging near the departure gate for Flight 317, nonstop to Miami, when he heard his name over a microphone.

And learned that he'd been bumped.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Mensing." The passenger service rep seemed to look bored, solicitous, and in charge all at once. "We have to overbook flights because so many reserved-seat holders don't cancel but don't show up either. Today everyone showed up! You have a right to compensatory cash payment plus a half-fare coupon for the next Miami flight." His racing fingers leafed through the schedule book. "Which departs in just five hours. If you'll take this form to the counter on the upper level they'll write you a fresh ticket."

If he took the next flight he'd miss connections with the excursion ship. He kept his rage under control, detached himself from the horde of travelers at the departure gate, and stalked back upstairs to find a supervisor and demand a seat on the flight he was scheduled to take. When he saw the length of the line at the upper level he almost decided to go home and forget the cruise altogether.

A large metropolitan airport two days before Christmas. Men, women, children, bundled in overcoats and mufflers and down jackets and snowcaps, pushing and jostling and shuffling in interminable lines that wove and shifted in front of the ticket counters like multicolored snakes. Thousands of voices merging into an ear-splitting hum. View through panoramic windows of snow sifting through the gray afternoon, of autos and trucks and taxis crawling to a halt. Honeyed robot voices breaking into the recorded Christmas carols to make flight announcements no one could hear clearly.

Loren was standing apart from the line, trying to decide whether to join it or surrender his fantasy and go home, when it happened.

He heard a voice bellowing something through the wall of noise in the huge terminal. "Bon! Bonreem!" That was what it sounded like in the chaos. It was coming from a man standing to one side of the line like himself. A short sandy-haired man wearing jeans and

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a down jacket and red ski cap, shouting the syllables in a kind of fury. "Bonreem!"

A man standing in the line turned his head to the right, toward the source of the shout, as if he were hearing something that related to him. A woman in a tan all-weather coat with a rain hood, just behind the man in the line, began to turn her head in the same direction.

The sandy-haired man dropped into a combat crouch, drew a pistol from the pocket of his down jacket, and fired four times at the two who were turning. In the bedlam of the airport the shots sounded no louder than coughs. The next second the face of the man in the line was blown apart. Someone screamed. Then everyone screamed. The man with the shattered face fell to the tiled floor, his fingers still moving, clutching air. The line in front of the ticket counter dissolved into a kaleidoscope of figures running, fainting, shrieking. Instinctively Loren dropped to the floor.

The killer raced for the exit doors, stumbled over Loren's outstretched feet, fell on one knee, hard, cried out in pain, picked himself up, and kept running. John Wilkes Booth flashed through Loren's mind. He saw uniformed figures racing toward them, city and airport police, pistols drawn. Two of them blocked the exit doors. The killer wheeled left, stumbled down the main concourse out of sight, police rushing after him.

In the distance Loren heard more screams, then one final shot.

The public-address system was still playing "White Christmas."

At first they put Loren in with the other witnesses, all of them herded into a large auditorium away from the public areas of the airport. Administrative people brought in doughnuts and urns of coffee on wheeled carts. The witnesses sat or stood in small knots—friends, family groups, total strangers, talking compulsively and pacing and clinging to each other. A few stood or sat alone. Loren was one of them. He was still stunned and he knew no one there to talk to.

After a while he pulled out of shock and looked around the room at the other loners. An old man with a wispy white mustache, probably a widower on his way to visit grandchildren for Christmas. A thin dour man with a cleft chin who blinked continually behind steel-rimmed glasses as if the sun were shining in his eyes. In a folding chair in a corner of the auditorium he saw the woman in the tan hooded coat, her head bowed, eyes indrawn, hugging herself and

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trying not to shudder. He started to get out of his chair and move toward her.

Another woman flung back the swing doors of the auditorium and stood in the entranceway, a tall fortyish woman in a pantsuit, her hair worn long and straight and liberally streaked with gray. "Loren Mensing?" she called out. Her strong voice cut through the hubbub of helpless little conversations in the vast room. "Is there a Loren Mensing here?"

Loren raised his hand and the woman came over to him. "I'm Gene Holt," she said. "Sergeant Holt, city police, Homicide. You're wanted in the conference room."

He followed her to a room down the hall with a long oak table in the center, flanked by chairs. The air was thick with smoke from cigarettes and a few pipes. He counted at least twenty men in the room—airport police, local police, several in plainclothes. The man at the head of the conference table stood up and beckoned. "Lou Belford," he introduced himself. "Special Agent in charge of the F.B.I. office for the area. The locals just told me you're a sort of detective yourself in an oddball way."

"I used to be deputy legal adviser on police matters for the mayor's office," Loren said. "A part-time position. I teach law for a living."

"And you've helped crack some weird cases, right?"

"I've helped a few times," Loren conceded.

"Well, we've got a weird one here, Professor," Belford grunted. "And you're our star witness. Tell me what you saw."

As Loren told his story Belford scrawled notes on a pad. "It all fits," he said finally. "The guy tripped over your feet and hurt his knee. When he saw he couldn't get out the front exit he headed for the side doors that lead to the underground parking ramps. If he hadn't stumbled over you he could have made it out of the building. Bad luck for him."

"You caught him then? Who was he, and why did he kill that man?"

"We didn't catch him," Belford said. "Cornered him in the gift shop. He saw he was trapped and ate his gun. One shot, right through the mouth. Dead on the spot."

Loren clenched his teeth.

"He wasn't carrying ID," Belford went on, "but we made him a while ago. His name was Frank Wilt. Vietnam vet, unemployed for the last three years. He couldn't hold a job, claimed his head and

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body were all screwed up from exposure to that Agent Orange stuff they used in the war. The VA couldn't do a thing to help him."

"The man he killed worked for the Veterans Administration?" Loren guessed.

"No, no." Belford shook his head impatiently. "Wilt was obviously desperate for money. It looks as if he took a contract to waste somebody. We just learned he put twenty-five hundred dollars in a bank account Monday. That part of the case is easy. It's the other end we need help with."

"Other end? You mean the victim?" Loren's mind sped to a conclusion from the one fact he knew for certain. "So that's why the F.B.I. are involved! Murder in an airport isn't a Federal crime, and neither is murder by a veteran. So there must be something special about the victim." He leaned forward, elbows on the conference table. "Who was he?"

"The accountant who testified against Lo Scalzo and Pollin in New York last year," Belford said. "John Graham. We gave him and his family new identities under the Witness Relocation Program. They've been living in the city for eighteen months. And now, Professor, we've got an exam for you. Question one: How did the mob find out who and where Graham was? Question two: Why did they hire a broken-down vet to waste him instead of sending in a professional hit man?"

Loren had a sudden memory of one of his own law-school professors who had delighted in posing impossible riddles in class. The recollection made him distinctly uncomfortable.

He stayed with the investigators well into the evening, helping Lieutenant Krauzer of Homicide and Sergeant Holt and the F.B.I. agents interrogate all the actual and possible witnesses. Shortly before midnight, bone-weary and almost numb with the cold, he excused himself, trudged out into the public area of the airport, retrieved his luggage, and grabbed a tasteless snack in the terminal coffee shop. He found his VW in the underground parking garage and drove through hard-packed snow back to his high-rise.

He was unlocking his apartment door when he heard footsteps behind him and whirled, then relaxed. It was the woman, the one in the tan hooded coat who had been standing in the line directly behind John Graham at the time of the murder. "Please let me in, Mr. Mensing," she said. Her voice was soft but filled with desperation, her face taut with tension and fatigue. Loren was afraid she'd

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collapse at any moment. "Come on in," he nodded. "You need a drink worse than I do."

Ten minutes later they were sitting on the low-backed blue couch, facing the night panorama of the city studded with diamond lights, a pot of coffee, a bottle of brandy, and a plate of cheese and crackers on the cocktail table in front of them. Slowly the warmth, the drinks, and the presence of someone she could trust dissipated the tightness from the woman. Loren guessed that she was about thirty, and that not too long ago she had been lovely.

"Thank you," she said. "I haven't eaten since early this morning, I mean yesterday morning."

"Let me make you a real meal." Loren got up from the couch. "I don't have much in the refrigerator but I think I could manage some scrambled eggs."

"No." She reached out with her hand to stop him. "Maybe later. I'd like to talk now if you don't mind. You may want to kick me out when I'm through." She gave a nervous high-pitched giggle, and Loren sat down again and held her hand, which still felt all but frozen.

"My name is Donna," she began. "Donna Keever. That's my maiden name. I'm married. No, I was married. My husband died just about a year ago. His name was Greene, Charles Greene." Her eyes filled with tears. "It was a year ago last week," she mumbled. "You must have read about it."

Loren groped in the tangle of his memory. Yes, that was it, last year's Christmas heartbreak story in the media. Charles Greene and his six-year-old daughter had been driving home from gift shopping, going west on U.S. 47, when a car traveling east on the same highway hit a rut. The eastbound lane at that point was slightly higher than the westbound because of the shape of a hill on which U.S. 47 was built. The eastbound auto had bounced up into the air, literally flown across the median, and landed nose first on top of Greene's car. Then it had bounced off, flown over the roofs of other passing cars, and landed in the ditch at the side of the highway. Greene, his child, and the other driver, who turned out to be driving on an expired license and with his blood full of alcohol, all died instantly. "I remember," Loren said softly.

"I was ill that day," Donna Greene said, "or I'd have been shopping with Chuck and Cindy. That's the only reason I'm still alive while my family's dead. Isn't life wonderful?"

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"It was just chance," Loren told her. "You can't feel guilty about it and ruin the rest of your life."

"No!" Her voice rose to the pitch of a scream. "It wasn't chance. That accident didn't just happen. Someone wanted to kill Chuck or Cindy or me. Or all of us!"

She broke then, and Loren held her while she sobbed. When she could talk again he asked her the obvious question. "Have you told the police what you think?"

"Not the police, not the lawyer who's handling the wrongful death claim for me, not anyone. It was only last week that I knew. A burglar broke into my house a week ago Monday night, came into my bedroom. He was wearing a stocking mask and he—he put his hands on me. I screamed my head off and scared him away. The police said it was just a burglar, but I knew. That man was going to kill me! The police think I'm exaggerating, that I'm still crazy with grief because of the accident."

"How about family? Friends? Have you told them of your suspicions?"

"My parents and Chuck's are all dead. My older brother ran away from home about fifteen years ago, when I was fifteen and he was twenty, and no one's heard from him since. I don't work, I don't have a boy friend and I just couldn't go to my women friends with something like this."

"What made you come to me?" he asked gently.

"Out at the airport auditorium, when that policewoman or whatever she was paged you, I recognized your name. I've read how you've helped people in trouble. When they let me go I looked up where you live in the phone book and came up here to wait for you."

"Why were you at the airport?"

"I had to get away. If I stayed here I knew that burglar would come back and kill me, if I didn't kill myself first. And I was right! You were there, you saw that man, that gunman standing a few feet from me and he called my name, Donna Greene, and I started to turn and he shot at me and hit the man next to me in the line. Oh, God, somebody, help me!" She broke again, terror and despair poured out of her, and Loren held her and made comforting sounds while his mind raced.

Yes, the two names, John Graham and Donna Greene, sounded just enough alike that in the crowded terminal, with noises assaulting the ears from every side, both of them might have thought their name was being called and turned. To Loren, less than a dozen feet

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away, the name had sounded like "Bonreem." But which of the two *had* Frank Wilt been paid to kill? If Donna was right, the double-barreled question posed by Agent Belford became meaningless. And if she was the intended victim, what would the person who had hired Wilt do next?

All the time he was soothing Donna Greene he fought with himself. "Don't get involved again," something inside told him. "The last time you saved someone he went out later and killed a bunch of innocent people. This time you're already partly responsible for Wilt's death. And for all you know this woman may be a raving paranoid."

And then all at once he knew what to do, something that would reconcile the conflicting emotions within him and make his Christmas a lot brighter too. He waited until Donna was under control again before he explained.

"I've been thinking," he said. "I don't think I'm qualified to judge whether you're right or wrong about being the target at the airport. But I know someone who is—a woman private detective up in Capital City named Val Tremaine. She's fantastically good at her work. I'm going to ask her to come down and spend a couple of days on your case, getting to know you, talking with you, forming judgments. You'll like her. Her husband died young too and she had to start life over." He disengaged himself gently and rose to his feet. "I'll make the call from my study. You'll be all right?"

"I'm better now. I just needed someone I could open up to who wouldn't treat me like a fool or a lunatic. Look, Mr. Mensing, I'm not a charity case. My lawyer is suing the estate of that other driver for three million dollars. He was rich, his attorneys have already offered to settle for three-quarters of a million. I'm not asking you or your detective friend to work for nothing."

"Don't worry about money now," Loren said, and went down the inner hall to the second bedroom that was fixed up as his study, closing the door behind him. He had to check his address book for the number of Val's house, the lovely house nestled on the side of a mountain forty miles from the capital's center, the house she had built as therapy after her husband had died. God, had it been that long since he'd called her? He wondered what had made their relationship taper off, his choice or hers or just the natural drifting of two people who cared deeply for each other but were hundreds of miles apart. He hoped she wouldn't mind his calling in the middle of the night. He hoped very much that she'd be alone.

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On the fourth ring she answered, her voice heavy with sleep and bewilderment and a touch of anger.

"Hi, Val, it's me . . . Yes, much too long. I've missed you too. Want to make up for lost time?" He told her about his involvement in the airport murder which she'd heard reported on the evening's TV newscasts, and about the riddle of the intended target which Donna Greene had dropped in his lap. "So if you haven't any other plans for the holidays, why not spend Christmas here? Check her story, be her bodyguard if she needs one, help her start functioning again. Take her to the police with me if you believe she's right." He knew better than to hold out the prospect of a substantial fee. That wasn't the way Val operated.

"You've got yourself a guest," she said. "You know, I was going to invite you up to my place for Christmas but—well, I wasn't sure you'd come."

"I'd have come," he told her softly. If she had invited him he wouldn't have been at the airport this afternoon, and maybe Frank Wilt would be alive and able to tell who had hired him, and maybe Donna Greene would be dead. Chance.

"I'll have to get someone to run the office and I'll need an hour to pack. No way I can get a plane reservation this time of year, so I'll drive. See you around, oh, say eight in the morning if I don't get stuck in the snow."

"I hope you like quiche for breakfast," Loren said.

A soft rapping on the front door jerked him out of a doze on the blue couch. Sullen gray light filling the living room told him it was morning. His watch on the end table read 7:14. "Yes?" he called in the door's direction.

"Me." He recognized Val's voice, undid the deadbolt and the chain lock. The second she was inside with her suitcase he kissed her. It was their first kiss in months and they both made it last. Then they just looked at each other. Val's cheeks were red from the cold and her eyes showed the strain of a long drive through snow-haunted darkness. She was beautiful as ever.

"I missed you," he whispered. "Mrs. Greene's asleep in the bedroom."

They talked quietly in the kitchen while they grated some cheddar, cut a strip of pepper and an onion and ham slices into bits, beat two eggs in cream and melted butter, poured the ingredients into a ready-made pie crust, seasoned them with salt and nutmeg, and

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popped the quiche into the oven. Loren reported on the murder and Donna's story as the aroma of hot melted cheese filled the kitchen.

"The first step isn't hard to figure," Val said, cutting the quiche into thirds as Loren poured orange juice and coffee. "She'll have to look at pictures of Wilt and tell us if he was her Monday-night burglar. If she identifies him we'll know she was the target at the airport."

"But if she can't identify him," Loren pointed out, "it's not conclusive the other way. Maybe two guys were after her, maybe she didn't get a good look at the burglar . . . We do make a delicious quiche, partner."

"And I'm glad we saved a third of it for our client," Val said, "because the minute she gets up I'm borrowing your bed. I can't take sleepless nights the way I used to."

They left Val asleep and drove downtown through the snow in Loren's VW and entered the office of the homicide detail a little after eleven. Lieutenant Krauzer was in his cubicle, and from his rumpled red-eyed look he'd been working through the night. He was a balding soft-spoken overweight man in his fifties who never seemed to react to anything but, like a human sponge, absorbed whatever came before him.

The lieutenant listened to Loren's story and to Donna Greene's, then picked up his phone handset, and twirled the dial. "Gene, you still have the Wilt photos? Yeah, bring them in, please."

"We've learned a bunch about Frank Wilt since you hung it up last night, Professor," Krauzer said. "He spent most of his time in bars, one joint in particular that's owned by a guy with mob connections. That could explain how he was hired for the hit if the target was John Graham, but it doesn't explain why. Damn it, the mob just doesn't pay washed-up vets to waste a top man on their hit list.

"Your story reads better on that score, Mrs. Greene. An amateur hires Wilt for a private killing. He messes it up at your house last week and runs. He follows you to the airport yesterday, tries again, and messes it up again, because the guy next to you in line happened to have a name that sounds a little like yours, turned faster than you did, and took the bullets meant for you. But, ma'am, you just can't ask me to believe that there's a plot to wipe out your family, because there's no way on earth the freak accident that killed your husband and daughter could have been anything but—"

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A knock sounded on the cubicle door and a woman entered. Loren recognized her as Sergeant Holt from last night. She placed a sheaf of photos on Krauzer's desk and left after the lieutenant thanked her. Loren handed the pictures to Donna and watched her face as she squinted and studied the shots with intense deliberation. In the outer office phones were ringing constantly, voices rising and falling, doors slamming, and in the street Loren heard the wail of sirens. Violent crime seemed to thrive on holidays.

There was a hunted look in Donna Greene's eyes when she handed the photos back to Krauzer. "I can't tell," she said in almost a whisper. "I think the burglar was taller but with that stocking mask he wore and in the dark I couldn't see his face well enough to be sure. Oh, I'm sorry!" She began to cry again and Loren reached out for her. Krauzer lifted the phone and a minute later Sergeant Holt came back in, put her arm around the other woman, and led her away.

Leaving Loren alone with Krauzer and free to ask the lieutenant for a large favor.

The Homicide specialist kept shaking his head sadly. "I can't spare the personnel to put a twenty-four-hour watch on her, Professor. Not short-handed the way we are around Christmas. Not without more proof she's really in danger. I like the lady, I think she was totally honest with us, and I know she's scared half to death, but—"

"But she's paranoid?" Loren broke in. "Like all the dissidents in the Sixties and Seventies who thought the government was persecuting them? Look, suppose she's right the way they were right?"

"Then you've got Val Tremaine to protect her," Krauzer said, "and we both know they don't come better." He gave Loren a bleak but knowing smile. "Go on, get out of here with your harem, and have a merry Christmas. Call me if something should happen."

If something should happen . . .

He decided to let Val sleep at the apartment and take Donna shopping so that he and his unexpected guests could have some sort of Christmas. After weaving through downtown streets in a crazy-quilt pattern to throw off any possible followers, he swung the VW onto the Interstate and drove out to the tri-leveled Cherrywood Mall. On the day before Christmas there was more safety among the crowds of frantic last-minute shoppers than behind fortress walls.

The excursion seemed to take Donna out of herself, erase some of the hunted look from her eyes. It was after four and their arms were

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full of brightly wrapped packages when they slipped into a dark quiet bar on the mall's third level.

"Feeling better?" Loren asked as they sipped Alexanders.

"Much." She smiled hesitantly in the dimness. "Mr. Mensing, these are the happiest few hours I've had since, well, since last year. I can never repay you. You've even made me begin to feel different about everything that's happened to me."

"Different how?"

"I've decided it wasn't just blind chance that I didn't go in the car with Chuck and Cindy that day and that the man next to me was shot and not me. I think I'm meant to live a while yet. And, oh, God, there's so much I've got to do after the holidays to put my life back in order. The house is a hopeless mess and the tires on my car are getting bald and I need a new will—Chuck and I had mutual wills, we each left everything to the other—and, you know, I may start dating again." She looked into her glass and then into Loren's eyes. "You're, ah, not available, right?"

"I'm honestly not sure," Loren said. "Val and I have been out of touch for months and we've been sort of preoccupied since she got in this morning." He paused, blinked behind his glasses, bewildered as he habitually was by the thought that any young woman could find a bear-bodied, unaggressive, overly learned intellectual in his late thirties even slightly desirable. "But look. However that turns out, I'm your friend. Val and I both are."

"To friendship," she said as they touched glasses. "To a new life."

It was the strangest Christmas Eve he'd ever spent. To an outsider it would have seemed that an exotic fantasy had become real—a man and two lovely women, a high-rise well stocked with food and drink. As night fell and with it fresh snow, Loren made a bowl of hot mulled wine and played the new recording of the Dvorak Piano Quintet No. 5 that he'd bought as his Christmas present to himself. Later he turned on the radio to an FM station and they listened to traditional carols as he gave Val and Donna the gifts he'd purchased at Cherrywood. Their squeals of delight warmed him more than the wine.

Part of him felt relaxed and at peace and part of him stayed alert like an animal in fear of predators. But as midnight approached he found it harder and harder to believe there was danger. Not with the snow outside turning to ice as it fell, not behind the deadbolt and chain lock in a haven twenty stories high.

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A little after 12:30 they exchanged good-night kisses and Loren surrendered his bedroom to the women. When they'd closed the door behind them he made a last ritual concession to security by tugging the massive blue couch over against the front door before arranging its cushions on the living-room rug in a makeshift bed.

He was fitting a spare sheet over the couch cushions when Val came back, her blonde hair falling soft and loose over the shoulders of the floor-length caftan he'd given her for Christmas. She smiled and helped him smooth the sheets. "Now you'll sleep better," she said. "I feel like a toad kicking you out of your bed on Christmas Eve."

"Can't be helped. Donna's asleep?"

"Out like a light. You were right to serve decaffeinated coffee." She sat on a sheet-draped cushion. "And thanks to that nap I had before the sergeant dropped by, I'm not tired in the least—"

"Sergeant?" Loren asked. He was suddenly alert.

Her face dropped slightly. "Oh, rats, I wasn't supposed to tell you. Lieutenant Krauzer sent a man over this afternoon just in case Donna was in danger. He came while you were shopping, showed me his ID, looked this place over, and set up a stakeout in 20-B, the vacant apartment across the hall. He said not to tell you and Donna so you'd act natural and not scare any suspects away. But it's good to know Sergeant Holt is standing guard."

Loren leaped to his feet. "Sergeant *who*?" he shouted.

"Gene Holt, Lieutenant Krauzer's assistant. He's been in 20-B since midafternoon. The couple that lives there is in Florida—"

"Describe him." Loren's face was white, and wet fear crawled down his spine.

"A tall man in his middle thirties, thin face, cleft chin. He wears glasses and blinks a lot as if his eyes were weak."

In that moment Loren saw the shape of the nightmare. "That's it," he muttered, and stood there frozen with understanding. He could hear clocks ticking, the night stirrings of the building, the plock-plock of icy snow falling on the outdoor furniture on his balcony. Every sound was magnified now, transformed into menace.

Val shook his shoulders, fear twisting her own face. "Loren, what in God's name is the matter?"

"Sergeant Gene Holt," Loren told her, "is a woman. And now I know who Weak Eyes is too."

"He had a badge and identification!" she protested.

"And if you know the right document forger you can have stuff

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like that made to order while you wait." He pushed her aside, headed for the phone on a stand in the corner. "I'm calling Krauzer and getting some real cops here."

The phone exploded into sound before he'd crossed the room and he jumped as if shot. A second ring, a third. He picked it up as if it were a cobra, forced it to his ear. Silence. Then a voice, smooth, low, calm. "Unfortunately, Professor, I can't let you call for reinforcements," it said.

Loren slammed the phone down, held it in its cradle for a count of ten, then lifted the handset. He didn't hear a dial tone. He punched the hook furiously. Still no dial tone. He whirled to Val. "Him," he whispered. "He must have planted a bug here while he was pretending to check the place out for security. He heard every word we said all evening and was just waiting for all of us to go to bed. We can't phone outside—he's tying up the line by keeping the phone in 20-B off the hook."

"We can phone for help from one of the other apartments on this floor!"

"We can't. 20-C moved out when the building converted to condo and 20-D's out of town. Besides, he's at the front door of 20-B. If you try to go out in the hall he's got you."

"Let's get out on the balcony and scream for help!"

"Who'd hear us in that storm?"

Val swung around, raced down the inner hall to the bedroom. Loren knew why. To throw on street clothes and get her gun. If she'd brought one with her. Loren hadn't asked.

The phone shrilled again. Loren stared at it as if hypnotized. He let it ring six times, nine. Over the rings he heard Donna's sobs of terror from the bedroom. Oh, God, if only it were Krauzer on the other end, or Belford the F.B.I. man, or anyone in the world except Weak Eyes, anyone Loren could ask to call the police! On the twelfth ring he picked up the receiver.

"Mensing," the low calm voice said, "I have just placed a charge of plastic explosive on the outside of your door. You have two minutes to take down that barricade I heard you put up and send Donna across the hall. Do that and you and Tremaine live."

Loren slammed the phone down. Val in a dark gray jumpsuit ran back into the living room. There was no gun in her hand. Loren almost cried out with frustration. "Donna's in your closet," she whispered. "I pushed the dresser against the door."

Loren nodded, held her close, and spoke feverishly into her ear.

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Time slipped away into nothingness. Val went down the inner hall, turning off lights, opened the fusebox, and cut the master switch. The apartment was pitch-dark now. Loren found the hall closet, put on rubbers, and his heaviest overcoat. Then he tugged the couch away from the front door, undid the deadbolt and chain, and ran across the room.

He slipped on the couch cushions in the middle of the floor and pain shot through his ankle. He bit down on his lower lip, hobbled the rest of the way across the room, threw open the door leading to his balcony. Sudden cold stunned him, made him shake uncontrollably as he stood outside, behind the curtained balcony door, and watched through the thin elongated crack.

The front door was flung back and Weak Eyes leaped in, using a combat crouch like Wilt at the airport. In his hand there was a gun. His eyes focused on the patch of light across the dark room, the light coming from the balcony. He stalked across the room like a wolf. Loren tensed, waiting. Yes, he was close enough to the balcony now, time for Val to make her move.

There she went, crawling across the wall-to-wall carpet in the dark, all but invisible in her jumpsuit, making for the front door and then for the firestairs.

Weak Eyes heard nothing, didn't turn. He kicked the balcony door all the way open, looked down the long balcony. There was nothing to see but a white-painted cast-iron outdoor table and three matching chairs. He took a cautious step out onto the balcony, his eyes trying to pierce the deeper shadows at the far end.

Loren brought the fourth iron chair down hard on the back of the killer's neck. Weak Eyes howled, flung his arms up for balance. The gun flew out of his hand into the slush. He skidded halfway down the balcony, his belly slammed into the outdoor table.

Loren kept hitting him with the chair until Weak Eyes wasn't moving. It was all Loren could do to keep from hurling him over the balcony rail and down twenty stories to the street.

Loren was still standing there, his teeth chattering in the cold, his ankle throbbing, sweat pouring down him, when a few minutes later Val and two uniformed patrolmen rushed out to the balcony.

"What a world," Lieutenant Krauzer grunted eight hours later. "Her own brother."

Weak Eyes was in a cell, Donna had been taken to the hospital under sedation, and they were gathered in Loren's apartment. He

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sat on the blue couch with his right leg raised on a kitchen chair and the ankle bandaged tightly. Val sat on a hassock at his side, refilling his coffee cup, handing him tissues when he sneezed. Outside, Christmas morning dawned in shades of smoky gray.

"It had to be her brother," Loren said. "Once Val described the fake Gene Holt it all clicked, because I remembered seeing a man of that exact description in the airport auditorium after the Graham murder. And then I remembered three things Donna had mentioned in passing: that she and her late husband had had mutual wills, that she hadn't gotten around to making a new will yet, and that her wrongful-death suit against the driver of the car that killed her family was going to net her a lot of money.

"Now suppose she'd been killed by that burglar, or at the airport? Who would have wound up with that money? Obviously if she died intestate it would go to her next of kin. Who's her next of kin? Her parents are dead, her only child is dead—*but she had a brother who dropped out of sight fifteen years ago.*

"Now the picture clears up," he went on. "Charles and Cindy Greene die in a tragic accident that gets heavy coverage in the media. Wherever he was at the time, Donna's brother hears of it, sees huge financial possibilities, comes to the city quietly, and begins shadowing her. He satisfies himself that the wrongful-death action is going to produce big money and that his sister hasn't made out a new will. He has to get rid of her before she does. He looks around—the forged ID and bugging equipment and plastique show he has underworld connections—and hires Frank Wilt for the hit.

"Wilt breaks into her house a week ago Monday night and bungles the job. Brother gives him another chance. Wilt follows her to the airport, makes his move—and by blind chance a man with a name similar to Donna's is next to her in line, turns faster than she does, and dies instead of her.

"Brother has gone to the airport too, as a backup in case Wilt blew it again. He and Donna are both rounded up as witnesses and taken to the auditorium but either she doesn't see him in the crowd or just doesn't recognize him after fifteen years. When she's let go he follows her to my place and works out a plan to kill her here, doing the job himself this time. He reads the newspaper stories about the airport murder, picks up the name of Sergeant Gene Holt, and uses it as his cover identity but makes the big mistake of assuming from the name that the sergeant is a man."

"And that bit of chauvinism's going to cost him twenty years in

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the slam." Krauzer yawned and lumbered wearily to his feet. "Well, if you'll excuse me it's Christmas morning and I've got grandkids to play Santy for." He winked broadly at Val. "Remember he's a sick man and needs his rest."

When he had let himself out Val slid off the hassock to sit on the floor. "Funny," Loren said as he ran his hand through her hair. "The way Christmas turned out isn't anything like what I either was afraid of or hoping for. I can't walk, I haven't slept in two nights, I've got the chills, but all in all I feel good. The crazy way this world goes, I'll be damned if I know if it's all chance or if it's meant."

"I'll take the world either way if you're part of it," Val told him softly.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

FQRSWTH!

by BERNICE A. BAHM

There was a young fellow named Crwth
Who was considered an upstanding ywth
Till one night in a fight
He stabbed, then took flight.
In trwth that was uncwth of Crwth!*

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**Crwth:* From the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language,* Unabridged Edition, Copyright 1966. From the Welsh, but not under foreign words or phrases. Means "crowd" and pronounced like "truth." Also has a connection to music; harp.

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"Anyway, what can happen?" . . .

DERELICTION OF DUTY

by HENRY T. PARRY

"One more, Burns? On the landlord this time. How about you, Forbes? And you, John?" Peter, the bartender, glanced from one man to another.

"Not me, thanks, Pete. We got to get back. See you. Come on, Forbes. You coming, John?"

"Not just yet, Burns. You and Forbes go ahead. I'll take that drink, Pete. With what this job is paying me, I need all the help I can get."

"Well, I don't know, John. Being a city policeman ain't so bad. It beats being a bartender. And both jobs are going to look a lot better pretty soon. Now that the war is about over, there's going to be a lot of men coming back. They'll be looking for work."

"Bad as being on the force is, it's better than being in the army. Did I tell you the draft was after me a while back?"

"It don't look like they'll be drafting anybody now."

"Well, they won't be drafting John F. Parker. The Old Man's Missus wrote a letter to some fellow named O'Beirne and got me out of it."

"Shouldn't you be going back, John? Like Burns and Forbes."

"Let them fellows go back if they want to. I ain't going back until I'm good and ready. All they got to do anyway is wait around and drive the Old Man and his Missus back. They don't drive me no place."

"How did you get here to-night, John?"

"I walked, that's how. In the rain. And you know what Pendel had the nerve to ask me, just as he told me to start off ahead of them? He asked was I prepared, meaning did I have my gun. Look, I got it right here—Colt's .38."

"Never mind, John. I'll take your word for it."

"Those people who always want to get back, always doing what they're told. They make me sick. Trying to get in good with the

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people who are higher up. You know what they call that kind in the army, Pete?"

"I ain't served but a couple million soldiers in here in the last four years, so I guess I know. But tell me, John, what exactly are you supposed to be doing to-night?"

"I been detailed to act as bodyguard for the Old Man. We got four men assigned altogether. But who gets night duty to-night? Me. Nobody else. Just me."

"Friday night too. Good Friday, come to think of it. That's why there ain't so many people in here."

"Pete, do you know that fellow over there? He looks like he's been hitting the bottle pretty hard."

"I know his name just as well as I do my own. I must be getting old. But wait, it'll come to me. Somebody told me they had seen him over at John Deery's place earlier to-night. Drinking brandy pretty heavy, they said. You know I just happened to think that the reason you don't like working to-night is because you meant to go out to Annie Wilson's place. To see Ada Green."

"Now how do you know about me going to Annie Wilson's?"

"A fellow in here sometime back said that you lived there for five weeks once. Said you got drunk and fired your gun out the window."

"Maybe I did and maybe I didn't. What I do off duty is my own business. Anyway, that was two years ago. But maybe you think that Superintendent Richards didn't take on about that. Departmental charges. Well, it wasn't the first time they had me up."

"John, you married?"

"Yes. Three kids."

"I don't know, John, seems to me a married police officer who lives for five weeks in a house like Annie Wilson's has got to be careful. Before you know it, you might give the place a bad name. Ha, ha! By the way, John, where you supposed to be right this minute?"

"I'm supposed to be standing right outside their door. To stop anybody who tries to get in. There's about a million people want to shake his hand."

"Ain't you likely to get into trouble if they find you ain't there?"

"I guess I got a little while yet. Anyway, he won't say nothing. He's pretty easy to get along with. Always got some little joke or story."

"So while you're standing here at the bar, nobody is guarding him?"

"That's right. Oh, they got guests with them. Some major and his

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girl. Anyway, what can happen? Seems to me if the police force want him guarded that close they should give me some help. But if they don't, it ain't no skin off my nose. I heard that the Old Man asked for some fellow named Eckert to be his bodyguard. Wanted him because he heard Eckert could bend an iron poker around his arm. They wouldn't give him up though. Maybe it's just one of his jokes. Hey, look, that fellow I asked you about, he's getting ready to leave. It looks like he's dressed to ride somewhere. What time is it?"

"It's seven minutes after ten. You mean you think it's time you went back on duty?"

"Well, give me one more, Pete, then I'll go back. If I feel like it. This play the Old Man is watching is all about how this Yankee gets mixed up with a bunch of highfalutin English people. Harry Hawks is playing the part and in one place he says—"

"John, I know, I know. When you tend bar in a saloon right next to a theater you get to practically learn all the lines. I got it."

"You got what?"

"The name of the fellow you asked me about. The fellow who just left. He's an actor. Name of John Wilkes Booth."

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Is there anything better on a cozy reading night than the tingling bafflement of a detective story with an "impossible crime"? Yes, a detective story with two *"impossible crimes"! . . . Another "miracle problem" from Dr. Sam's memory bank . . .*

THE PROBLEM OF THE GYPSY CAMP

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"I promised you another story today, didn't I?" old Dr. Sam Hawthorne told his visitor, rising to refill their glasses. "About the medical mystery at Pilgrim Memorial Hospital, and the man who died of a bullet in the heart but had no wound on his body. Really, though, it's also the story of a gypsy curse—and of a weird mystery that confronted me with not one but *two* impossibilities . . ."

The new decade of the 1930s dawned in Northmont (Dr. Sam continued) much as the old one had ended. It was an especially mild winter in the northeast, with some days warm enough even for an afternoon ball game at the new field in Pilgrim Park. Sheriff Lens was just back from his honeymoon, and I hadn't even seen him since the happy day. There were the usual wintertime complaints among my patients but by and large it was a quiet time, both medically and criminally, in our town.

"I never felt so lazy," I told my nurse April one fine January morning. "I think spring fever's starting early this year."

She was busy sorting through the inactive files. "That's not the

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only thing that's starting early. The gypsy camp is back at the old Haskins place."

"It is?" Somehow the news surprised me. It had been just over four years since the gypsies were last in Northmont, and I'd assumed they were gone for good after that Christmas steeple murder. But here they were back again at their old campsite. Mrs. Haskins had died a year or so earlier, at the age of eighty, but her property was still in litigation. Meanwhile, the fields had become overgrown and the old barn was sagging dangerously on one side. It had become something of an eyesore for the town, but apparently the gypsies didn't mind. "When did they show up?"

"I drove in that way this morning and noticed their wagons. Mrs. Peachtree down the road said they came over the weekend. She's trying to get Sheriff Lens to evict them, but I guess there's some legal problem unless the owner of the land requests their removal."

"And the courts can't decide who the owner is."

"That's the trouble."

I got to my feet and stretched. "Well, April, I've got to get moving before I fall asleep. I think I'll take a run over to Pilgrim Memorial and check on Mrs. Ives."

"Good luck," she called after me, knowing I'd need it. Mrs. Ives was a grouchy woman in her sixties who was convinced all doctors were trying to poison her.

I thought about stopping by to see Sheriff Lens on the drive over, but decided that could wait till later. It was his first full day back in the office and I knew his work would be piled high. Besides, I really did want to speak with Abel Frater about the future of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital. Opened in March of the previous year with much fanfare, the eighty-bed facility had never been more than one-quarter full, and now an entire wing had been closed off to save fuel and electricity.

There were three doctors on the staff now. The hospital's founder, Dr. Seeger, and its black resident, Lincoln Jones, had been joined by Dr. Abel Frater, a skilled surgeon out of Boston. Seeger had given over the business end of things to Frater and it was his reluctant decision to close a wing of the building. Even a non-profit hospital had to watch the pennies.

Frater saw me as I entered the building and called out, "Making your morning rounds, Sam?"

"I have to check on my patients, Abel. Can't just abandon them to your care forever."

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Abel Frater was a tall slender man who walked with a slight limp, the result of a leg wound suffered in the trenches of France during the war. He had a little mustache that was beginning to gray, and a way of smiling that made even the most pessimistic diagnosis somehow acceptable to the patient. "Who is it this time?" he asked. "Mrs. Ives?"

"The one and only."

"Better you than me. The woman accused us of neglecting her yesterday."

"I'm not surprised." I dropped my voice a bit so we wouldn't be overheard by the nurse at the front desk. "How are things going here, now that you've cut back to forty beds?"

"Oh, a little better. We have sixteen patients today, and that's about average for the past few weeks. I think Seeger's resigned to the fact that he built too large a facility for present needs. Still, who knows what tomorrow holds, eh?"

"Any danger of closing entirely? I'd hate to see Northmont lose this place."

"Oh, we'll be around. I—"

He stopped suddenly, staring over my shoulder at the hospital's entrance. I turned my head and saw a black-haired, mustached man coming through the door. He wore a short dark jacket that hung open to reveal a colorful sash around his middle in place of a belt. And as he drew closer I could see a single gold earring worn in his left lobe. It was one of the gypsies from the encampment.

"Can I help you?" Dr. Frater asked the man.

"I have been cursed," he told us, looking terrified. "I will die of a bullet in the heart—"

"You need the sheriff," I suggested, "not a hospital."

But the words were hardly out of my mouth when he clutched his chest and toppled over. Frater was at his side at once. "Get a stretcher, Sam! It looks like a heart attack!"

We rushed him to the nearest empty room while one of the nurses came to assist us, but it was too late. Frater had bared the man's chest and was massaging his heart when suddenly he stopped and said, "It's no use. The man is dead."

I placed my stethoscope to the hairy chest and listened. There was no heartbeat. Remembering a time when I'd once been fooled into thinking a man was dead while he was still alive, I performed a number of other tests. I even held a mirror to his nostrils, but it did not cloud.

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"Trying to bring him back to life, Sam?" Dr. Frater asked.

"No, just making sure he's dead. He went pretty fast, even for a heart attack. It was almost as if he'd been shot as he seemed to fear."

"You believe in gypsy curses now, Sam?"

"Hardly. There's no wound on the body—not even a scar from an old wound."

Abel Frater corrected me. "Knife scar on his arm, but it's an old one. That certainly didn't kill him."

"Could I be present when you do the autopsy?"

"Certainly. But first we'd better notify his family, if he had one."

The dead man had carried no identification, but I quickly established his identity at the gypsy camp. There were about twenty brightly decorated wagons drawn up in the field at the old Haskins place, about a mile from the house and barn which were now deserted. The horses had been tied to a line at one end of the camp, and as I arrived a young man in his early twenties was feeding them. He'd seen my car drive up and asked, "Are you a lawyer?"

"No, I'm a doctor. We have one of your people at the hospital."

His eyes widened in panic. "Edo Montana! He feared the curse!"

"Does he have relatives here?"

The young man nodded. "I will take you to his sister, Teres."

Teres Montana was a tall angular girl about the same age as the young man. When she saw us approaching her wagon she jumped to the ground to confront us. "What is it, Steve? Who is this man?"

"I'm Dr. Sam Hawthorne. Your brother is Edo Montana?"

"Yes."

"A man died at the hospital this morning, apparently of a heart attack. I'm sorry, but it might be your brother."

She let out a long high-pitched wail, and I feared she might topple over as her brother had. Others came running at the sound, and one powerful gypsy grabbed me in a bear hug. "Did he offend you, Teres?" he asked.

"Release him, Rudolph—you have done enough already! Your curse has killed my Edo!"

My arms were freed at once and I turned to stare into Rudolph's stricken face. "How is that possible?" he asked. "I did not shoot him!"

"But did you threaten him?" I asked.

"I heard him," Steve said. "It was only this morning that they fought, and Rudolph told him, 'May you die with a gypsy bullet in your heart!' "

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"Shut up, you!" Rudolph snarled. "I did not kill him!"

"We need someone to identify the body," I said. "The hospital will have to do an autopsy."

"I will go," the girl said quietly.

We left the others and walked across the field to my car. To put her at ease I asked about the others in the camp, mentioning names of those I remembered from previous visits of the gypsies to Northmont. But she seemed to know none of them. "Edo and I only joined this tribe recently, near Albany," she explained.

"Who is the king of this tribe?"

Teres took a deep breath. "Rudolph Roman. That is why his curse carried such power."

"Why did he curse your brother?" I asked, but she did not answer. The hospital came into view and she was reminded of her task. It had only been a few minutes' drive from the Haskins place, with its overgrown fields surrounded by woods, but overland it would have taken Edo Montana ten minutes of running to reach Pilgrim Memorial.

I escorted her through the front door and back to the autopsy room where Dr. Frater awaited us. He shook hands solemnly with the girl and offered his sympathy. Then he lifted the sheet from the dead face just enough for her to see it and cry out, "Edo, Edo!"

I took her by the arm, steadying her. "Come on, I'll drive you back."

She stared as if she'd forgotten who I was. "There is no need. The gypsies will come for me."

I wondered why she said "the gypsies" rather than "my people," but I had no time to think about it further. Dr. Seeger burst into the room, looking anxious. I could see drops of sweat on his bald head.

"There's fifty or sixty gypsies outside, heading toward our front door. Should I get the gun from my office?"

"I hardly think that's necessary," I told him.

Seeger had been the founder of Pilgrim Memorial, and in that instant he must have feared they were storming his building to destroy it. Teres Montana turned to him and said, "They come to honor the dead."

"We have to do an autopsy before we can release the body," Dr. Frater said. "Go talk to them and calm them down."

"They are calm," she replied, but she went out as instructed.

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"They'll probably stay outside till we release the body to them for burial," I said. "Maybe we'd better get to that autopsy, Abel."

Seeger followed the girl outside and Frater and I slipped into surgical gowns and masks. He pulled on his rubber gloves and selected a scalpel for the initial incision. I rolled back the sheet from Edo Montana's naked body.

As soon as Frater parted the flaps of skin and exposed the chest area I saw the torn tissue and muscle. The heart itself had been pierced, and we only had to probe a few seconds to discover the small-caliber bullet that had done the damage.

I let out my breath slowly, not believing what I was seeing.

"You'd better phone your friend Sheriff Lens," Frater said quietly. "This is murder—the man was shot through the heart."

Sheriff Lens began grumbling as soon as he saw the autopsy room. "You might know I'd just be back from my honeymoon when you'd get yourself involved in another impossible murder, Doc! What is it this time?"

"The impossibility seems to be more medical than anything else. If there's a locked room in this killing it's the skin of the victim. Dr. Frater and I both examined the body at the time of death. There was no wound on it, front or back, and the only scar was that old one on his arm. I was here when Dr. Frater cut into the body, and I saw the damage caused by the bullet. I helped him probe for the slug myself."

Sheriff Lens stared distastefully at the body with its unveiled chest cavity. "Not much blood."

"He's been dead over an hour," Abel Frater explained. "The blood seeks the lowest level after death, like any liquid."

"So somebody murdered him?"

"It seems so," I agreed. "All we have to figure out is who and how."

"You mentioned something about a gypsy curse. Are those the gypsies standing around outside? The ones Mr. Peachtree phoned about?"

"That's right. They're camped over on the old Haskins place, just like last time. Apparently the one who cursed the dead man is their leader, Rudolph Roman."

Sheriff Lens nodded. "I'll go get him. I always believe in starting with the most likely suspect."

A few moments later he reappeared with the powerful gypsy who'd grabbed me in the bear hug. He identified himself as Rudolph Ro-

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man, leader or king of this gypsy tribe since the death of his father. He admitted to having heard from other gypsy tribes that the old Haskins land was good camping ground, free from police harassment.

"But Mrs. Haskins is dead now," I informed him. "That land is in litigation." I wasn't too familiar with the court case, but I knew it involved a nephew who claimed the land should go to him rather than to charity. Mrs. Haskins' will had been ambiguous.

Rudolph Roman merely smiled at my words. "We recognize no litigation. The land is for the people's use. We camp there, but we do not damage it."

"What about Edo Montana?" Sheriff Lens asked. "You sure damaged him!"

"I spoke without thinking," the gypsy leader admitted. "We were having a violent argument and I spoke the curse. 'May you die with a bullet through the heart!' I shouted. He turned pale at my words, and ran off."

"And died with a bullet through the heart," the sheriff said. "Are your curses always that effective?"

Rudolph Roman sighed. "I am the leader of this tribe, as was my father before me. My people expect me to do as my father did. He once cursed a man who died the following day. That curse has become a legend with us, and when I spoke those words unthinkingly my people remembered. They warned Edo of my power."

I nodded. "And he ran."

"But I did not kill him! I did not mean to kill him!"

"What did you do after he ran away?" I asked.

"Went back to my wagon to be alone."

"And why did the two of you argue?"

"I—I cannot say."

"This is a murder investigation," Sheriff Lens reminded him.

When Roman answered his voice was very soft. "It was about the girl Teres," he told us.

"What about her?"

"I wanted to take her for my wife. My request threw Edo into a rage. He called me vile names, and that was when I cursed him."

"I'd think he would have considered it an honor to have his sister wed to the leader of the tribe."

Roman started to reply but then thought better of it. His mouth closed and he would say no more. "We should talk to Teres again," I suggested.

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While Sheriff Lens went to get her, I returned to the autopsy table where Frater was preparing to sew up the body. "The sooner we turn it over to them for burial, the sooner they'll be gone," he said. "We can learn nothing more by keeping it here."

But something in the dead and torn heart caught my eye. I slipped on a rubber glove and extracted a thin sliver of wood. "What's that?" Frater asked.

"I don't really know. Looks like a tiny piece of wood, but I can't be sure."

I helped him sew up the autopsy incision. "What are you going to list as the cause of death?"

"Hell, Sam, the man had a bullet in his heart! That's the cause of death. It's not up to me to figure out how it got there."

Sheriff Lens took Teres Montana to one of the offices for questioning, so she would not be confronted with her brother's body again. I joined them as he was saying, "Rudolph Roman has admitted he fought with your brother when he asked to marry you, but he would say no more about it. Were you present when this happened?"

"Yes," she admitted, with head bowed.

I decided to ask a question of my own. "There was a great age difference between you and your brother, wasn't there? He appears to have been in his late forties."

She hesitated. "Yes, he was forty-seven. I am twenty-two. He was my stepbrother, really."

"Was he your brother at all?" I asked. "Or was he something more?"

"What do you mean?"

"His anger at Rudolph's offer of marriage makes me wonder. What was your true relationship, Teres?"

She burst into tears then, and Sheriff Lens looked dumfounded. He started to speak but I waved him to silence. "Tell us the truth, Teres," I said softly. "You and Edo were married, weren't you?"

She nodded, trying to control her tears. "We were married last summer in Albany, before we joined Rudolph's tribe. Because we had not gone through the traditional gypsy wedding ceremony, Edo wanted to keep it secret."

"It seems you kept the secret too well, at least from Roman. But why couldn't you simply tell him the truth and have a gypsy ceremony?"

She merely shook her head, unable to answer for a moment. Finally, bringing herself under control, she told us in a soft voice, "I'm

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not one of them. I'm not a gypsy. I ran away from home and met Edo in Albany. He said I was dark enough to pass for a gypsy and so we joined the caravan. He told them I was his sister, so no question would arise about my blood. He was known to some others of the tribe, and nobody questioned it until Rudolph decided he was in love with me. If Edo told the truth about our relationship it would have come out that I wasn't a gypsy, and I would have had to leave the camp."

"Do you have any idea how Roman might have killed him?"

"No—unless it really was a curse."

"Did Edo run away from the camp immediately after his argument with Roman?"

"I think so, yes. I tried to get Steve to find him—you remember, the young man you met this morning?—but he couldn't. Steve said once he had a capsule containing a potion that could be taken to ward off curses."

"A capsule?" Something stirred in my brain. "How large a capsule?"

"He showed it to us once. It looked big enough to give to a horse."

The door opened and Dr. Frater stuck his head in. "Thought you'd want to know that I've finished with the body and turned it over to the gypsies. They're going back to their camp."

I turned to Teres. "Will you go with them?"

She lifted her head, brushing the hair from her eyes. "I don't know."

In that instant she looked very young indeed. "You said you ran away from home. You're not twenty-two, are you? People who are twenty-two don't need to run away from home."

"I'm seventeen," she admitted.

"Damn!" Sheriff Lens was on his feet. "And you were livin' at that gypsy camp with a man thirty years older than you? I'm takin' you into custody till we can get you back to your parents!"

Abel Frater was still in the doorway. "What should I tell them outside?"

"She's detained for questioning," the sheriff responded. "Don't tell them anything else."

I walked to the window and watched as the men of the gypsy tribe hoisted Montana's body onto a stretcher and started off the way they had come. "I hope we did the right thing releasing the body," I said. "We've no idea how he was killed."

"A bullet in the heart," Sheriff Lens answered. "That's good

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enough for Frater and it's good enough for me. I told him he could release the body, just to get rid of them."

I went in search of Dr. Seeger and found him by the front door, watching the gypsies depart. "Thank God they're gone, Sam. If I never see them again it'll be too soon."

"Maybe you can answer a question for me."

"Sure. What is it?"

"Those gelatin capsules they're starting to use for drugs—is it possible a small bullet could be placed in one and swallowed without the person realizing it?"

"Sure, but the bullet would just pass through his stomach and out the intestinal tract. It wouldn't end up in the heart, if that's what you're thinking."

"I know that much. I was just wondering about it. How about this—is it possible an old bullet could remain in the body for years, lodged near the heart, and finally kill a person after some exertion or fright?"

"It's possible, but not in this case, Sam. Frater showed me the body before he sewed Montana up. There's no doubt a bullet was fired into the body. The damage was too recent and too extensive to have been caused by an old wound. Besides, the only scar was on his arm."

"I know. Don't mind me. I'm just trying to rule out every possibility."

"And whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?" Seeger asked with a smile.

"That's just the trouble—nothing remains! But I did find a tiny splinter of—"

"Doc! Help me!"

We turned and saw Sheriff Lens staggering down the corridor toward us. There was blood on his nose and face.

"What happened?" I asked, running to him.

"He punched me and took the girl! They ran out the back way."

"Who punched you?"

"One of them gypsies! I heard her call him Steve."

It was late afternoon, beginning to grow dark, by the time I'd stopped the sheriff's nosebleed and accompanied him to the gypsy camp. Steve and Teres were nowhere to be found, and Rudolph Roman denied any knowledge of where they might be. "You'd better

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turn them up by morning," Sheriff Lens told him, "or I'm arresting everyone here!"

Roman merely smiled. "You believe you can do that?"

"Damn right I can do it! And I'll get the state police to help me!"

"Gypsies can fade away with the night."

"You just try it! I want that girl back, and I want Steve too, for assaultin' me!"

The others in the camp merely watched us as we walked back to the car. Already some men and boys were gathering wood for evening bonfires to ward off the chill of the January night. "I wasn't fooling, Sam," the sheriff told me. "I'm calling the state police." He started the car and headed back to town. . .

"Roman implied they might be gone by morning."

"They're not goin' nowhere till I get my hands on that Steve and the girl! I'll make sure of that if I have to watch the camp all night!"

I could see he was furious, considering the attack on him to be a personal affront. He telephoned the state police from the jail and requested that three cars be sent to help him round up the gypsies in the morning. Then he called his deputies and ordered them in too.

I checked with April and learned I had a patient to see on the way home. I drove out past the Haskins place and saw the silhouettes of the caravan wagons against the glowing gypsy bonfires. They seemed to be settling in for the night. Lens and one of his deputies pulled up behind me and parked off the road with a good view of the camp. I waved a good night to him and continued on my way.

I'd always been an early riser, and the following morning I came awake while it was still night, not much after five a.m. The gypsy camp was very much on my mind, and although there were still a couple of hours before daylight I decided I should get dressed and drive over to the Haskins place. I didn't want Sheriff Lens, or the gypsies, doing anything foolish.

Downing a cup of coffee and a piece of toast quickly, I went out to the car, shivering a bit in the morning air. It took me ten minutes to reach the old farm, and I saw the sheriff's car still where I'd last seen it. A state police car was parked down the road about twenty feet away. I tapped on the glass and opened the door. "Keeping awake, Sheriff?"

"Oh, it's you, Sam. I was hoping it was more state police. It'll start gettin' light any minute now, and I want to move in on them."

"You been awake all night?"

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"All night," the deputy with him confirmed. "Sheriff don't want any of them slippin' away."

I stared through the darkness in the direction of the campsite, wondering if any of the bonfires were still burning. But there was nothing to break the curtain of night. Headlights appeared on the road in front of us and I saw another state police car pull up and park. Sheriff Lens got out to greet them.

"They're trespassing and possibly harboring a criminal as well," I heard him explain. "One of them punched me yesterday afternoon and helped a suspect escape. There's also been a killing that almost certainly involves them." He led them back to the car and I shook hands with the uniformed officers. I wasn't happy to see their hands resting on the butts of their service revolvers, or to note that one of the men in the other car had produced a shotgun from the trunk.

"I don't think guns will be necessary," I told them.

"We heard somebody got shot yesterday."

"Well, yes," I admitted. "But—"

I stopped talking as my eyes became more accustomed to the gradual approach of dawn. A mist seemed to hang over the fields, and I saw now that a bit of smoke still rose lazily from one of the almost dead campfires. But more than that I saw something that boggled the mind.

Where last evening twenty wagons had stood with their horses, now there was nothing. Only the remains of the bonfires testified to the fact they'd ever been there. Somehow during the night, with Sheriff Lens and his deputy standing guard all night, the gypsy camp had vanished.

"It's the devil's work!" Sheriff Lens growled, striding back and forth across the empty field. The rising sun had only confirmed what they could already see—somehow the entire caravan of gypsies had disappeared during the night.

"Or another gypsy curse," I suggested quietly, only half in jest. Looking at our surroundings, I had to admit the thing seemed impossible. The Haskins field was bordered on three sides by tall stands of trees, and fenced to keep cattle from wandering too far. The only exit to the highway was the narrow rutted lane where the sheriff's car had been parked. "Could you have dozed off?"

"I might have, once or twice, but my deputy Frank was awake the whole time. Besides, we were parked right across the end of the lane. Even if we were both asleep they couldn't have gotten twenty

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horses and wagons past us. There's no room. They'd have ended up in the ditch!"

I had to admit he was right. I strolled past the ashes of the bonfires and made a circuit of the field, inspecting the fence for signs of passage. "A man could go over that easy," Frank said to me, a bit sheepish about the whole thing.

"Sure," I agreed, "but what about the horses and wagons? There aren't any breaks in the fence, and the wagons couldn't get through those trees anyway."

The state police were taking a dim view of the entire matter. "You sure they were here in the first place?" one officer asked the sheriff.

"Sure, I'm sure! And Doc here saw them too. You think we're crazy or something?"

I poked around at the charred remains of the fires. They had been here, all right, and now they were gone. They had vanished as easily as that bullet had appeared in Edo Montana's heart.

"Where you goin', Doc?" Sheriff Lens called to me as I headed back to my car.

"To work. And I'm going to make a phone call or two."

"Can't you help us out on this? We got *two* impossibilities in this case, Doc!" His voice was pleading.

"Go back home to your new bride, Sheriff. You shouldn't have left her alone last night anyway. I'll phone you when I have something."

"What about the gypsies?"

"Have the state police send out a general alarm. Vanishing from this field might have been easy for them, but staying out of sight on the public highways will be a real miracle if they can pull it off. Look for them about a hundred miles from here, possibly heading northwest toward Albany."

"But how—?"

"Later, Sheriff."

It was still early when I reached my office, and I was able to catch up on the previous day's mail before April arrived. She looked startled when she saw me already at my desk. "You been here all night, Dr. Sam?"

"Not quite. I wanted to stop by the gypsy camp on my way in."

"I heard the sheriff was going to run them all in."

"They beat him to it. They up and vanished."

"The whole camp?"

"The whole camp."

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"What are you going to do?"

"Make a phone call," I said. I flipped through the address book on my desk, searching for a number I'd called once, two years earlier, when I was treating old Mrs. Haskins.

I caught her nephew as he was about to leave home for his Boston office. Explaining who I was, I told him about the gypsies that had camped on his aunt's land. "I know about them," he answered curtly. "My lawyer says to leave them there."

"Why is that?"

"We're trying to convince a judge the property should come to me instead of some charity. My lawyer figures as long as the gypsies are camped there it creates a bad impression. I promise to use the land, while the charity would let it stand idle for future use, attracting more gypsy caravans."

"What sort of will did Mrs. Haskins leave?"

"The land was to be left to me or to the charity, whichever could demonstrate its use was in the best public interest of the citizens of Northmont. A crazy will, but the judge has to decide the issue. Which is what he's doing right now."

"Well, I can tell you the gypsies are gone, as of this morning."

"What?"

"You heard me. They just vanished overnight."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Tell me something, Mr. Haskins—which charity was mentioned in your aunt's will?"

"Some non-profit hospital you got there. Pilgrim Memorial?"

"Yes," I said quietly. "That's the name."

"I have to go to work now, Dr. Hawthorne. Just what was it you called about?"

"You've answered all my questions, Mr. Haskins."

I was driving toward the hospital ten minutes later when I passed the sheriff's car on the road. He honked at me and I pulled to a stop as he backed up. "That was a good guess, Doc," he yelled out the window. "The state police picked up the gypsy caravan just this side of the New York state line. How'd you know?"

"As you said, it was a good guess. Follow along with me to the hospital and we'll wrap this thing up."

Things had quieted down considerably at Pilgrim Memorial from the previous day. Dr. Seeger was anxious to see us, and when I asked that Dr. Frater be present too he buzzed him immediately. "What

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is this?" Frater asked as he came in. "A final confrontation, the way it happens in mystery novels?"

"Something like that," I admitted.

As usual, Sheriff Lens was more direct. "We've got the gypsies in custody and now we've come to arrest a murderer," he announced.

"Not quite, Sheriff," I corrected. "There's no murderer here."

"Huh?" His mouth dropped open. "Doc, you told me—"

"That we'd wrap this thing up, and that's exactly what I intend to do. But there's no murderer simply because there was no murder. And we've had two impossible crimes without any real crime at all."

"No crime?" Frater asked. "But what about the bullet in Edo Montana?"

"The closest thing to a crime might be the desecration of a dead body. And I doubt if the sheriff will bother to charge you with that, Dr. Frater."

He simply stood there facing me, saying nothing. It was Seeger who finally spoke. "What do you mean, Sam?" he asked.

"We have to remember that Edo Montana came running to the hospital from the gypsy camp. Why? Because someone had uttered a curse? That's not very likely, unless Montana was suffering some symptoms along with the curse. A chest pain, for instance, just after Roman's words, might have scared him into seeking medical assistance. And then what did he do? He ran ten minutes to the hospital, the worst possible action if he was experiencing the beginning of a heart attack. He arrived here, collapsed, and died—a natural death."

"But—"

"It was just before he died that Abel Frater heard his dying words about the curse, about the bullet in the heart, and decided to make it come true. He took the gun from your office, Seeger, and while I went off to visit the gypsy camp he fired a bullet into the dead man's chest and heart."

"There was no wound," Sheriff Lens argued.

"I found a tiny splinter of wood in the heart. I think Frater fired through a thin board held against the dead man's chest. This would have served two purposes—to slow down the small-caliber bullet enough so it wouldn't exit through the back, and to shield the chest from powder burns that might have singed the hair and left other marks.

"Firing through a board, Frater left only a small entrance hole which was easily hidden by flesh-colored putty or makeup. The body

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was covered by a sheet and I had only a glimpse of the chest before Frater cut into it—making his incision directly over the bullet hole, of course. The victim's hairiness helped to hide the wound too."

"Why would he do a crazy thing like that?" the sheriff asked.

"I think we should let him tell us that. It was the Haskins property, wasn't it, Abel?"

His shoulders sagged a bit then. Perhaps he'd thought I was only guessing up to that point. After a moment he said, "I didn't harm anyone. The man was already dead of natural causes. But here was a judge in Boston about to decide whether Mrs. Haskins' nephew or the hospital got the land. I'd been on the phone to our lawyer just yesterday and he said the judge knew about the gypsies camped there. It looked bad for us. It looked as if the community would be better served by Haskins farming it than by our owning the land and letting it stand idle for another few years, attracting gypsies. I wanted that land, for the hospital's future. By firing a bullet into a dead man's chest I knew it would spread talk of the gypsy curse. They'd either be arrested or forced to make a quick exit from Northmont, which is exactly what happened. I wrapped the gun in a towel to muffle the sound, but a .22 doesn't make much noise anyway. And I fired through a board just as Sam said."

"How'd you know it all?" Seeger asked me.

"I eliminated the impossible, just as you said. And if the bullet was fired into the corpse after death, only Frater could have done it and hidden the wound."

"What about the gypsy camp?" Sheriff Lens wanted to know. "How did that disappear?"

"The question really is *when* did it disappear, Sheriff. Roman moved his horses and wagons out quickly, between our late afternoon visit to the camp and your return in the evening to watch it."

"But the wagons were still there! I saw them!"

"What we saw were *silhouettes against the campfires*. They were pieces of cardboard cut to the size of the wagons. It's probably a trick Roman has used before in tight spots, and I imagine each wagon carries its own piece of cardboard for just such an emergency. A few of the gypsies stayed behind, tending the fires and giving evidence of normal activity so the caravan would have time to escape down the highway. Then after nightfall they simply burned the cardboard silhouettes in the bonfires and escaped over the fence to rejoin the caravan. If you look closely at the remains of the fires you'll find evidence of the cardboard pieces."

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"I'll be damned!" Sheriff Lens muttered. "But you knew right where to look for them, Sam."

"A good guess, as I said earlier. If they left before dark last night I figured they could cover about a hundred miles in their wagons. Montana and Teres had joined them near Albany and I figured they might head back in that direction."

The sheriff merely shook his head. "I still can't believe it. Two impossible crimes, and yet there was no crime."

"Some days are like that," I said with a grin.

So that's the way it was (Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded). Dr. Frater left the hospital staff the following week and moved out west somewhere. Roman's gypsies were released without charges when the sheriff discovered that Teres and Steve had never rejoined them. The two ran off together, telling Roman they were getting married. I suppose you can say the story had a happy ending, though perhaps Rudolph Roman wasn't too happy with the loss of Teres.

"I see our bottle is empty, and it's past my bedtime anyhow. But come back again and I'll have another story for you—about the time when gangsters and bootleggers fought a regular war in Northmont, and even a bizarre impossible crime seemed mundane by comparison."

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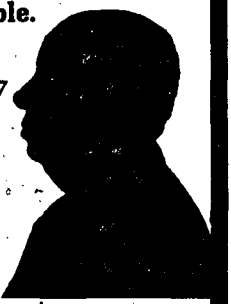

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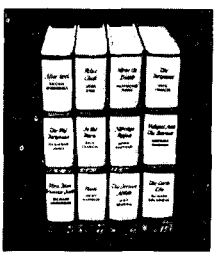

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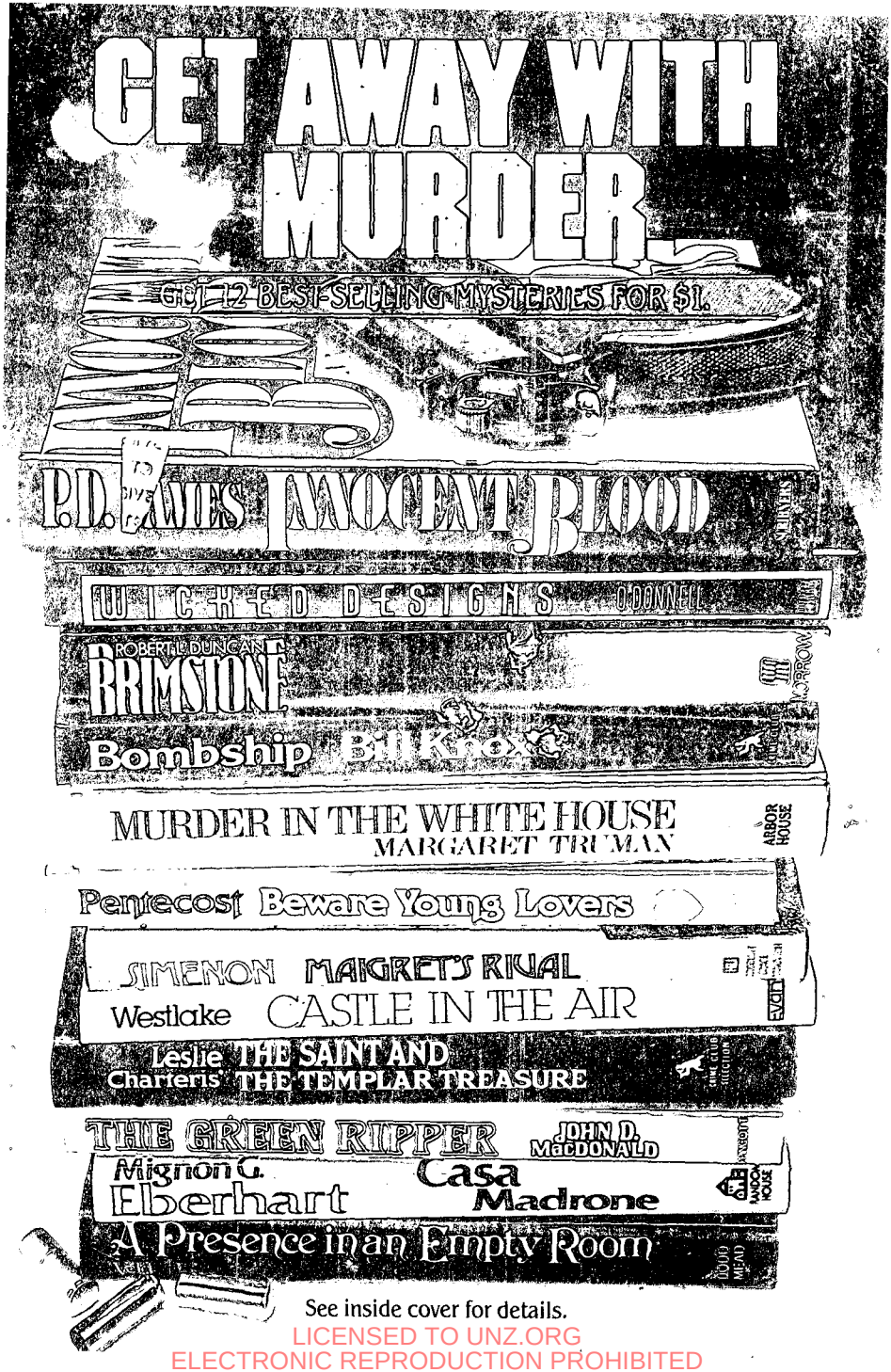

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